

Chapter 9: Beyond the Strains of Credulity

It was still raining as we left the mansion and the sky was so filled with dark clouds that it was impossible to tell whether the sun had fully set or not. I held out the umbrella for Medea, but to Aífe, I turned and said, “It’s going to be suspicious enough for just the two of us. Could you make the trip in spirit form?”

Aífe cocked an eyebrow and her lips quirked a little, but without a word, she vanished from sight.

I turned back to Medea and offered her my arm. Her eyebrows journeyed skyward, and she looked at me, completely unimpressed, as though to ask me, ‘really?’

“Your dress isn’t modern in any way, shape, or form,” I told her bluntly, “but if you lose the cloak and take my arm, anyone who sees us will be more focused on our public display of affection than what you’re wearing and why we might be out at this time of day.”

She mulled it over for a long moment, and then at length, she sighed, muttered, “Fine,” and looped her arm through mine. A flash of light later, and the hooded black shawl over her shoulders disappeared, leaving her in the purple gown that really complimented every part of her figure.

“Let’s get this over with,” she grumbled.

I led her off without another word, and in the gloom, we made the journey through Miyama towards the bridge. I was extra careful to steer away from both my ancestral home and the looming specter of the Matou mansion so that I might avoid the attentions of either of my sisters or the greatest threat in the entire War.

In another setting, it might have been romantic. I had a woman on my arm who was so breathtakingly beautiful that she almost didn’t seem real, and we were walking together under an umbrella as a steady rain pitter-pattered above us. We were alone on the streets, because everyone had retreated inside, and when we got the bridge, looking out over the river and the bay in the distance, that would be the perfect moment for a soft, tender kiss.

But the fantasy was just a fantasy. The woman on my arm was beautiful, but it was the same beauty of a deadly viper, poised to strike. She was stiff and untrusting, her mouth drawn into a miserable line, and I didn’t have to be a mindreader to know she didn’t want to be there with me. It was cold, the rain was chilly, and it clung to my skin like dew, sapping the warmth from my body.

By the time we made it to the bridge, nothing had changed, and there was a strange sensation I couldn’t explain, not quite *déjà vu*. There was a sense of surreality that I was walking across it just as Emiya Shirou would have in another lifetime, accompanying a woman equally indisposed to open her heart to me, and the words that lodged in my throat were an eerie echo of what he might have said, then and there.

They weren’t the words Medea wanted to hear. They wouldn’t do anything for her, right now. Even if I could do them justice and speak them with the same passion, earnesty, and certainty he would have, the sum total of my relationship with Medea was an hour or two. The Emiya Shirou in that life had had several life and death battles and almost two weeks to wear away at Saber’s cold exterior and emotional walls.

Besides. It wasn't like we were alone, was it? Aífe might have been invisible, but she was still there, following us. Words meant for Medea alone couldn't be spoken in the presence of a third party.

We crossed the bridge in silence without stopping. The very place where Shirou would have begged Saber to learn to be happy for her own sake instead of chaining herself with regret passed us by without comment.

When we reached the other side and started into Shinto, I murmured to both the silent Medea and the intangible Aífe, "Just a bit further."

Medea let out a huff through her nostrils, but didn't reply. Neither, predictably, did Aífe.

I'd been to the park where the civic center used to be, once. Way back when, when I was still trying to piece everything together and wasn't quite so sure of myself and what was true, I went to the park just to make it real.

I was sick for three days afterwards.

Even now, several years later, the oppressive, unwelcoming feel of the place made me supremely uncomfortable. The curses had permeated the soil so deeply and completely that they hung about the entire place like a miasma, cloying and suffocating. There wasn't any special smell, never something so tangible and physical, but the air itself was heavy and pregnant with dread and suffering.

A great tragedy had occurred here, and no one was allowed to forget it.

"This is it," I announced quietly. "This is where the Grail attempted to manifest at the end of the last Grail War."

"This..." Medea's eyes swept out over the barren landscape, the dead park where nothing grew and nothing prospered. A monument to the lives taken in the Great Fuyuki Fire. "This is..."

"If I can feel it, I know you can," I said.

Aífe shimmered into existence not far away, searching the place. Looking for what, only she really knew. Her upper lip curled in disgust.

"This is foul," she declared. "The air, the trees, the land itself — it's all dead. Like something has fouled the entire place. Cursed it."

"There are five starting penalties," I murmured.

The words never failed to send a shiver down my spine.

"They called it the Great Fuyuki Fire," I started slowly. "No one had any explanation for why it happened or what caused it, but out of nowhere, ten years ago, a terrible conflagration struck the civic center and spread quickly to nearby buildings. Dozens of homes wound up burning up. Hundreds of people died. They never did find a good explanation for it, so they had no choice but to chock it up to a freak accident."

And of the people who *did* survive, well... Only one of them had truly made it out of here and lived.

“Ten years ago,” I went on, “the Fourth Holy Grail War took place. My father was one of the participants. He summoned Gilgamesh, using the first snake’s shed skin as a catalyst. My father had a pupil, a man by the name of Kotomine Kirei, whose father, Kotomine Risei, was the overseer from the Church. When Kirei received Command Spells in the leadup to the Grail War, my father and his concocted a plan that would ensure my family won the Grail.”

“The Gilgamesh we’ll be up against in *this* War?” asked Aífe.

“The very same.”

I took a deep breath. This bit had been seared into my brain. Whatever else I might have forgotten in the last ten years, there was no way this could have been among it.

“When Kirei told Gilgamesh that the Grail couldn’t reach completion without *all* of the Servants being sacrificed to it, including him, the two of them concocted a plan of their own. Kirei betrayed my father, killed him, and took Gilgamesh’s contract to continue fighting. Since Kirei’s wish didn’t require the Grail’s full power, it could be achieved without all seven Servants, and Gilgamesh found that idea perfectly acceptable.”

Isn’t it obvious? He was supposed to leave.

“Caster and Kirei’s original Assassin were already dead. Lancer was defeated around that time, too. Kirei tricked Berserker’s Master into maiming my mother, and then the stage was set with Gilgamesh against Rider and Saber against Berserker. After Rider and Berserker were defeated, Saber confronted Gilgamesh at the civic center while their Masters fought in the basement below them.”

I only remembered fragments of that fight. But the parts I remembered clearest were all the parts where Kirei proved just how superhuman a martial artist he was.

“Why here?” Medea asked. “What was so special about this civic center?”

“You should be able to feel the ley line,” I said mildly. “It was one of the four places the Grail is said to manifest. Kirei brought the vessel here to lure Saber and her Master in, to dictate the terms of the final battle. But the vessel was overflowing. Five Servants had entered into it, and with the ritual so close to completion, the contents of the Grail spilled out. When he realized that the Grail was just a gigantic monkey’s paw, Saber’s Master ordered her to destroy the vessel to keep the ritual from completing.”

I gestured out at the park.

“He miscalculated, and a small portion of the endless curses that make up the evil inside the Grail leaked out. He survived the initial fire, but the curses killed him about five years later.”

“And Kirei?” Aífe asked. “If he was fighting Saber’s Master so close to the Grail, then how did he survive to fight in this War?”

My mouth twisted into a bitter grin. “He died fighting Saber’s Master, and the evil inside the Grail restarted his heart.”

“What?” Medea squawked.

“Kotomine Kirei is a sinful man,” I explained. “He can find joy only in others’ suffering. His wish upon the Grail was simply the desire to know how God could create such a twisted being as him, and whether someone could be truly evil from the moment of birth. Angra Mainyu, the wish trapped inside the Grail, wants only to be born. What greater ally could it find than a Master who wanted to see it live?”

That, particularly, was knowledge I’d held onto tightly. Kotomine Kirei would be one of my two great enemies in this Grail War. What he was, what he wanted, and what made him tick were so important, I’d scribbled them down on the first scrap of paper I’d been able to find ten years ago.

“Do you understand now?” I asked Medea solemnly. “What you see around you is the aftermath of the slightest of the Grail’s contents spilling over. If the ritual is allowed to complete, the wish of All the Evils of the World will be made manifest. Countless lives will be lost, and even if your wish is granted, it likely won’t be how you want it to be.”

She was quiet for a moment. Her arm tugged on mine as she tried to pull it closer to herself, as though to shield herself from the truth.

“What if you’re wrong?” she asked quietly. “What if these dreams were just that?”

“What if I’m right?” was my immediate response.

She didn’t have an answer for that.

“I realize that all of this has strained credulity from the very beginning,” I said. “But Caster, remember that I knew your true name before we met. I knew who your Master was without you saying anything about him. I knew what would happen between you, and I knew Lancer would be chasing you. I knew where to find you on the path to the temple.”

She looked at me like she was just realizing she’d forgotten all of that amidst all of the other things I’d told her and Aífe.

“I’m sure you can come up with other explanations for why I knew all of those things,” I went on. “There are definitely other explanations that would make more sense than the one I’ve given you. But, Caster, what reason would I have to lie? Why would I construct this elaborate backstory unless it was the truth, knowing as I must have how difficult it would be to convince you of it?”

“I find it incredibly small-minded, if you want my opinion,” Aífe said bluntly. “She’s a Caster. Even odds that prophecies or precognitive visions were somewhere in her legend.”

Medea shot her a withering look, as though she could set Aífe ablaze with nothing but her eyes. Ironically, I’d met a few people at the Clock Tower who could do exactly that. It was never as impressive as it sounded.

“Well?” I prodded gently and patiently. “Have I convinced you?”

Medea turned from Aífe and instead scowled out at the dead park around us. At length, she asked, “How many Servants are required for the Grail to manifest and All the World’s Evils to be born?”

“It’s supposed to be six,” I said, “with all seven activating the ritual for achieving the Third True Magic. But that’s only if Gilgamesh isn’t taken out before the very end. He’s so overwhelmingly heavy a legend that he counts for three Servants.”

Both of the women startled at that.

“Three?” Aífe choked.

“He’s worth that much?” Medea squawked.

“He’s the King of Heroes,” was my answer. “The very worst thing you can do is underestimate him. The only reason he isn’t guaranteed to win from the word go is because his ego often overwhelms his pragmatism.”

Paradoxically, this only made Aífe grin. “Now, *that* sounds like a fight I could enjoy.”

“You have a plan, I’m assuming?” Medea asked.

I shook my head. “Let’s get back to the mansion. No use talking about that sort of thing out in the open, where prying ears might be listening.”

They glanced around as though looking for any out of place animals that might be familiars and agreed, and Aífe vanished back into Spirit Form as Medea and I made our way back to the house arm in arm, the way we’d left.

The rain had finally started to ease up by the time we made it back, but I had the sense that it was quickly approaching midnight and I didn’t want to exhaust myself too much when there was still so much to be done in preparation for the upcoming War.

“So,” said Medea almost the instant we had stepped inside the front door, “your plan?”

I steered her back to the sitting room and went to retrieve a small pile of boxes I’d set off to the side. These, I placed next to the coffee table that the couch and chairs were arranged around, and then I took two pictures from where they’d been left when we went to the park: Kotomine Kirei and Matou Zouken.

“These will be our two greatest enemies during this War,” I proclaimed.

“Not Gilgamesh?” Aífe asked with an arched eyebrow.

“Not unless it’s absolutely necessary. There are two main ways to take him out. The first, we rely on Saber, but it requires arranging for her to receive the artifact that was used to summon her in the last War. It’s doable, but hard to finagle properly. The second, we need to rely either on Emiya Shirou or Rin’s Archer, because they’re both Gilgamesh’s natural enemies.”

Aífe frowned, eyeing me critically. Had she really been looking forward to fighting him that much?

“As I told Caster earlier, Herakles can give Gilgamesh a decent fight, but he has two disadvantages: first, he’s a Berserker, so half of what makes him so dangerous is drastically diminished, and second, his Master is his priority, so if he has to defend her, he can’t move as freely. Perhaps somewhat fittingly, the only other Servant who can put up a good fight against Gilgamesh is Cúchulainn, by

exploiting the advantage of his *Protection from Arrows*, but even that is only a delaying action. In a pinch, he can buy half a day, but he *will* lose eventually.”

Aífe straightened, her eyes widening a little. Had she been putting her old nemesis on some weird kind of pedestal? Like she was the only one allowed to be good enough to defeat him outright?

“He may not give us a choice,” Medea pointed out. “Didn’t you tell me that he was one of the enemies I would have to face if I went to the temple?”

My lips pursed.

It was a frightening thought, but also a perfectly valid one. Once the rest of the combatants whittled down, or even if that worm, Shinji, went to Kotomine after getting disqualified himself, Gilgamesh would start to involve himself. Since he was obsessed with Saber, he’d leave her for last and go about eliminating everyone else in his way, and that would inevitably include us.

“If that happens…”

When that happened…

I didn’t have a better plan for it.

“Rider and I will hold him off for as long as we can while you head up to the mountain and dismantle the Grail, Caster. We should be able to buy you at least an hour.”

Because we had no way of fighting back that I had any real reason to expect would secure a win. Aífe was probably good enough to hold him off for a few hours, though, and that would give Medea enough time to push the emergency abort button. I hated the position that would leave us in, but the number of choices we had was very small.

Medea reached out and grabbed Shirou and Rin’s pictures. She turned them towards me, arching a questioning eyebrow.

“Why not just team up with these two, then? If their Servants are the key to defeating Gilgamesh, then it seems more reasonable to me to make use of that.”

I sighed and carded a hand through my hair. “Because there’s a function buried in the Grail system that prevents it.” I only barely remembered it myself. Something about a Cardboard? “If half or more of the competitors team up together into one bloc, the Grail will find seven more Masters and summon seven more Servants, starting a Great Grail War. On this city’s ley line? It’ll drain the land dry, and that would cause a whole host of other problems.”

“The founders of this thing had all of their bases covered, didn’t they?” Aífe snorted.

Medea frowned. “Wouldn’t even that be preferable to letting Gilgamesh get his way?”

“If we could control it? Sure.” I shook my head. “But if the situation deteriorates enough that it becomes a more palatable option, then it’s already too late to try.”

And if all else failed… I hated even thinking about it, but my final gift to Rin would ensure that she and Shirou succeeded after Medea, Aífe, and I were gone. It was my last remaining contingency, but

the greatest weapon in this War was knowledge, and in my absence, those two would be proverbially armed to the teeth.

“And what are some of these other problems you’re so frightened of?” asked Medea.

“For one? It’ll bring loads of very dangerous attention from a lot of very dangerous and very unscrupulous people from the Mage’s Association. People with a much longer lineage and quite a bit more power than any of the other Masters in this War, who also would be much more likely to use the Grail, regardless of what the consequences are. If the Church decided to get involved, too, then we’d wind up with a bloody three-way War that really could be called a war.”

In a pinch, if I appealed directly to the Vice Director, it might be possible to get the Policies faction on my side. But that had its own problems, and at the end of the day, if any of us was still alive to account, my family might wind up being displaced and cast out of even its token membership in the Association. Whoever the new Second Owner was would crack down on us with extreme prejudice, if we weren’t just kicked straight out of Fuyuki.

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves, though,” I said, steering the conversation back. “Gilgamesh is a concern for much later in the War. Ideally, he’s the last enemy we have to face, and by that point, it won’t matter. Before that, we need to take down these two.” I gestured to Zouken and Kirei’s pictures. “If we can’t handle them, then Gilgamesh will be the least of our worries.”

Aífe shrugged, pinning me with another cool, critical look. “I don’t see why we don’t just deal with them immediately. This Zouken hasn’t even summoned a Servant yet, correct? And Kotomine is only human.”

“Kirei is physically imposing enough to match fists with a Servant and have a decent chance of forcing a retreat,” I told her. “He’s also crazy and clever enough to use the leftover Command Spells from previous Wars for single-use burst enhancement to add speed and power to his blows, meaning if you underestimate him, he can and will deal a hard blow that might just defeat even you before you’re expecting it.”

Aífe’s brow furrowed.

“As for Zouken, if he hasn’t already, then he or his surrogate will summon in the next day or two,” I confirmed. “The reason we *can’t* just storm his house and blow him away is that he’s not that easy to kill. Zouken is a distributed existence. His body is constructed entirely of his familiars, blood worms, and his soul is currently divvied up between them. Even if we destroy his body, he’ll just move his soul to the nearest safe familiar and reconstitute himself once he’s managed to escape.”

“And you have a plan for dealing with that?” Aífe asked.

From the pile of boxes I’d grabbed, I picked up the smallest and pulled off the lid, revealing a gleaming silvery dagger. Mithril, and I’d had to part with a significant portion of the funds I’d spent the last ten years saving in order to have this thing custom made.

“That’s why I need a spell placed on this that will target the entirety of his existence at once. Something that will kill him no matter how small a sliver of his soul it comes into contact with.”

“And the other boxes?” said Medea.

Setting the aside, I picked up a larger box and opened it to show the silky fabric of a long, black cloak. It was made of the sturdiest fabric I could find to ensure that it could stand up to the rigors of being worn by a Servant in combat.

“Rider, I might need you to keep an eye on things and intervene occasionally to keep everything on track, so we need a cloak that can conceal your presence as a Servant — or even the magical energy from me as a Master so that *I* can sneak into places without being noticed. And lastly...”

The final box contained a long, silvery sword about thirty-eight inches from tip to pommel. Mithril, just like the dagger, and where another decent chunk of my savings had wound up being spent.

“Well, this one’s really more of a personal request than something necessary for the War itself. I can use this just fine on its own, but if it’s possible to make it a more effective weapon without cutting corners on the other two things... An ‘augmented slash,’ if you will. Amplifying the input magical energy through convergence and acceleration and releasing it in a single, concentrated attack. That was my thinking.”

Aífe was the one who cottoned on immediately, and she snorted, laughing to herself. “You want an Excalibur imitation? Really, Master?”

I gave her an awkward smile and a sheepish shrug.

“Well, it seemed appropriate,” I said. “If there’s any sword I should seek to imitate with my own weapon, it’s the most powerful holy sword ever made, isn’t it? Even if this imitation is nothing more than a pale shadow, it would still be quite something.”

Medea reached out and picked up the cloak, frowning as she inspected it. Her brow furrowed and her lips pulled into a thin line.

“Is this really what you’re going to have us doing for the duration of the Grail War?” she asked skeptically. “Crafting items of power for you, like meager blacksmiths and enchanters?”

Wasting our time, she didn’t say, but I heard it nonetheless.

“The only advantages I have against the other Masters right now are my knowledge and the fact I can actually support two Servants at once,” I told her. “I need every leg up I can get.”

“You want to fight your own battles,” said Aífe, like she approved. “You don’t intend to let us handle everything ourselves.”

“I’m not going to pick fights I can’t win just for the sake of fighting,” I said, “but there are some fights I can’t afford not to pick, so I have to make sure I don’t lose. I intend to stack the deck however I can, before those fights become unavoidable.”

Medea tossed the bundle of black fabric back into its box, a disgusted scoff gathering in the back of her throat.

“This is what you pulled me away from the temple to do for you?” she demanded. “I could have been laying traps and defenses! Pulling from the ley lines to fortify a base of operations and turn the whole temple into a veritable castle! I could turn the entire mountain into my domain and twist it in its entirety to ensure I was all but untouchable!!”

She sneered down at the cloak. “Instead, you want me to play Arachne and weave magic clothes for you!”

“And you would have chosen the most obvious place in the entire city for a Caster to set up shop,” I retorted calmly. “Everyone in the War would have known you were up there, and everyone would have known exactly where to find you.”

“In a fortress!” she spat. “Behind layers and layers of bounded fields, all protected by a natural barrier that weakened whoever set foot inside!”

“None of which make any difference to Herakles, Gilgamesh, or Zouken,” I pointed out, still calm.

She faltered, and her eyes immediately sought out Aífe. “With Rider to guard the gate —”

“I’m not talking about the gate,” I cut across her. “The gate only matters to Herakles, and even he could ignore the rank down if his Master really decided not to care. The only guardian you could station at the gate and expect to take on all comers is Saber, and Saber would absolutely refuse to join you. You’d waste way too much time and energy trying to break her to your will, and at the end of the day, if you did, it would probably put her at a disadvantage against Gilgamesh.”

“It would still be better odds than sitting around making these ridiculous weapons for *you*, wouldn’t it?” she said acidly.

I sighed. I knew she wasn’t exactly happy with our arrangement, so maybe moments like these were just inevitable.

“You’re not tools for me to use up and discard, and I’m sorry if I gave you that impression,” I began, and Medea flinched a little. “But frankly, as a Caster, you’re disadvantaged against all but one of the other Servants in the War. The only Servant who won’t be able to either endure or outright ignore your spells is Assassin. Knowing what I do, I’m trying to prepare for the enemies that we just can’t avoid. Rider can handle the Servants in one on one combat at least well enough to force a draw or a stalemate. You can layer on a few more defenses to the house to keep us safe from intruders.”

I gestured down to myself.

“Me, I’m just a squishy human. Everything I can do as a mage, you’re just frankly better. Light years ahead of me. And even if I tried to fight Kirei and Zouken with pure magecraft, I already know I’m a fool to even attempt it. Zouken is too experienced, and Kirei was trained specifically to take down magi. They would both crush me like an ant.”

Carefully, I picked up the dagger.

“This? This is me coming at it laterally. Zouken doesn’t have any weaknesses I can exploit, so the only thing I can do is use his own strength against him. He thinks he’s all but untouchable, since his entire being is connected to his blood worms. He’ll let me get the first blow, and then disperse his familiars and attack with numbers. He won’t be expecting an attack that reaches right to his core, no matter where it lands.”

Placing the dagger back in its box, I took the sword next and hefted it up by the handle.

“This? This is just because the sword is the only thing I’m really practiced with.” I put it back. “Kirei fights with his fists and with a type of disposable shortsword called Black Keys. I’m safer keeping him at arm’s length, because he shouldn’t have much experience against an actual swordsman. He’s used to people trying to hit him from afar or get up close.”

I sat back down in my chair with another sigh. I didn’t mention that even with the sword, Kirei was far and away too skilled for me to have any hope of beating him, right now. I just hadn’t gotten far enough.

“I’m not in this War for glory or having a wish granted,” I said. “I don’t want to fight great battles or face strong opponents. My goal isn’t to *win*. It’s to ensure that the end of the world doesn’t happen under my feet. As long as All the World’s Evils is never born from the Grail and this whole thing doesn’t end in disaster, I’ve met my win condition.”

Medea looked away, folding her arms across her chest. A miserable scowl marred her face.

“Can you even use that thing anyway?” she mumbled.

It was hard to argue that anything was more important than stopping the apocalypse, wasn’t it?

A half-smile curled at the corner of my mouth. “Not as well as I’d like. I’ve been trying to find the old Celtic martial arts by tracing back modern Irish Bataireacht, but I have to admit that I haven’t had as much success as I was hoping to.”

Aífe suddenly straightened, a strange glimmer in her eyes as a triumphant, bloodthirsty smile slowly curved her lips.

“Oh?” the words came out in something almost like a purr. “The old Celtic martial arts, you say? And why would something like that have piqued your interest, Master?”

Don’t grin, Yukio. Hold yourself steady, and whatever you do, don’t grin.

“For their potential, of course,” I told her smoothly, like I wasn’t hoping she was going to give me exactly what I’d summoned her for. “Kirei is a master of Bajiquan, to the point he verges on the superhuman. It seemed shortsighted and stupid to try and beat him at his own game, so I wanted to master a martial art just as potent but wildly different. Something that didn’t even share a common root with his.”

Aífe chuckled and her smile gained teeth. She regarded me hungrily, like a shark that had just stumbled onto an all-you-can-eat sushi buffet.

“Well now, Master,” she said silkily. “It seems you might just be able to grant my wish after all.”