

Chapter 2:

“Are you ready, Yukio?”

I awoke slowly, rising to consciousness one moment at a time, as the last vestiges of my dream echoed in the back of my head as though down a long tunnel.

...No, that wasn't right, was it?

A dream was fake, a thing without substance or reality, the lurid imaginations of the subconscious mind as it dealt with extant stressors through symbolism and metaphor. To wit, it was the mind's way of dealing with the problems that plagued it even unto the sleeping world.

What I had just seen now could not, therefore, be called a dream, because it was not something that had been conjured by my imagination, but was, rather, something that had already occurred in reality. An unavoidable truth that could not simply be dismissed as the conjurations of my subconscious.

A memory.

The memory of the moment when everything had changed, and the person known as Tohsaka Yukio could truly have said to have been born, and yet to have died, as well. The memory of my enlightenment, and also of my damnation.

I groaned and leveraged myself up into a sitting position, pressing the heels of my palms against my eyes.

“Maybe it's coming back here, after spending so long away,” I muttered to myself.

I *had* been gone six months, after all. It wasn't entirely out of the question that returning to my childhood home after being gone for that length of time might have stirred up old memories. It could even have been the familiar smell of the old place, dredging up stuff I'd thought I'd dealt with ages ago. Scent was one of the most powerful psychological triggers, after all.

I sighed and rubbed at my messy hair.

“Well, it's a hell of a way to start the morning, that's for sure. Digging up old existential crises and questions of self identity. I could even be forgiven for rolling back over and getting some more sleep. Totally reasonable.”

I stopped, blinked, and then laughed.

“Wow, I really am her twin brother, aren't I? That sounds like the kind of excuse Rin would make to stay in bed in the morning.”

Good grief. If she and I weren't fraternal twins, we'd be perfect for each other, wouldn't we?

“...I just had a very dangerous thought, right now, didn't I?”

Damn it. Of all the things to inherit from him, *those* sorts of sentiments for my sister were exactly the most troublesome, and I could most certainly have done without them.

I sighed.

“I’m really off, today, aren’t I?”

I smacked my palm against my forehead a couple of times, then ground the heel of it between my brow, as though to push out any weirdness from my thoughts. It didn’t really work as intended, but at least it did manage to banish any remnants of sleep. Silver linings, right?

I slid out of my bed and into a pair of slippers, and then, shivering, grabbed the thick bathrobe I’d slung over my desk chair at some point. Was it yesterday, or six months ago? I didn’t remember, exactly, because I’d never used it while I was in London.

“Well, however miserable London can get, at least I was warm,” I groused as I pulled it on.

“Seriously. It rarely even *snows*, here. How come it’s so much colder in this house than an apartment in England?”

Should’ve had this old place renovated for a modern furnace system, back when I’d had the chance. Secrets of magecraft be *damned*, it would’ve been worth it just to be able to walk around in shorts during the winter months, or at least not have to wear layers in my own damn house.

Tempting, but a toothless thought from the beginning. Rin and I would probably get into the most serious fight we’d ever had if I tried something like that without running it by her, first, and even if I pulled out my best arguments, she’d probably put her foot down and refuse. In the end, she *was* the heir, now head of the family with everyone else gone, even if I was technically her guardian. As far as the Mage’s Association was concerned, her word was law and my place was to obey.

Ab, geez! But it’s so cold!

“Tea, tea, tea,” I muttered to myself as I shuffled out of my room. “That’s what I need. Some tea to warm me up.”

I went down the hall, then descended the steps and made a sharp right turn towards the kitchen, where I found a teapot, my favorite red mug, a bottle of honey, and the tin of Earl Grey that Rin never touched. I set the kettle on to boil, then measured out the tea leaves while I waited.

Rin tended not to use honey in her tea. Well, it was more like she tended not to eat sweets or sugary foods, because she was absolutely certain she “knew exactly where it would all go.” I found it utterly ridiculous, of course. We — that is, the Tohsaka family — owned one of the relative handful of Japanese honey producing businesses left, the largest and most premium one, in fact. Why not enjoy our own product?

No, I didn’t arrange for us to purchase the land, hire the workers, acquire the bees and the beehives, and work out distribution, all so that I could have a consistent source of locally made, quality assured honey to put in my tea. That would just be ridiculous, and if anyone ever accused me of it, I would deny such a thing in the strongest possible terms.

(I totally did. I'm utterly shameless, and even if it was a completely unnecessary extravagance, it wasn't like we were losing money on the business. It was easier to compete simply because honey was by and large imported from China and Korea, and therefore more expensive than my company's locally made and sourced honey.)

"Well," I told the air wryly, "dear old Dad probably would've had something to say about it, but I consider it a worthwhile investment. This stuff is *delicious*. And besides, it's like that old adage goes: if you want something done right, you've gotta do it yourself."

Just don't ask me to put on a beekeeping suit.

A few minutes later, the kettle began to whistle, and I set about pouring it over my tea leaves, then let it sit to steep. That was always the hardest part about making tea, the waiting. I was certain old Nagato or one of my more Zen ancestors probably would've had something to say about patience and the virtue thereof, likely quoting some Buddhist koan or something, but frankly speaking, I was too cold to care.

It was around that time, just as I finished making my tea and went to the living room to sit, that Rin came marching in, already fully dressed in her usual sweater-and-skirt combo and with her hair styled.

"You're up early," I remarked casually over the rim of my mug.

She grimaced, and for all her apparent readiness, she still looked like she was about half asleep. Yeah, Rin really wasn't a morning person, although being entirely fair, I wasn't much of one, either. *And* I was still getting over the jetlag.

"I'm trying to get all of my preparations done," she admitted.

"Ah." I took a sip to cover my thoughts and any reaction that might have slipped onto my face. "It's that time again already?"

Like I hadn't been counting down the days on my calendar.

"Yeah." She sighed. "It's early this time, so it's unexpected, but things should start off for real in about a month. I'm holding off on my entry for another couple of weeks, though."

I knew exactly what she was talking about, of course.

The Fifth Holy Grail War. The fifth in a series of failed rituals, conducted as a battle royale between seven magi functioning as Masters and seven Heroic Spirits summoned as Servants. The last one had torn our family apart, leaving Rin and me orphans. Father had died during the fighting, and Mom shortly afterwards.

And my sister intended to enter. Of course. Dad hadn't lived long enough to explain the whole thing to her, so for her, it was really a matter of pride. My sister had a bit of a competitive spirit, after all.

Well, to be fair, so did I.

“I’m guessing you’ll want me out of the house and somewhere safe, for the duration.”

“Yeah.” She sighed again. “Sorry to do this to you, Yukio, especially since you only just got back, but you remember how it was, right? Dad sent us away last time to keep us uninvolved, so I’d feel better if you did the same thing, this time.”

Not that it had helped much, but I supposed that your opinion on that varied, depending on how you defined ‘helping.’ After all, even if it hadn’t gone the way my parents had planned, at the end of the day, I wouldn’t be where I was now — in any sense — if things hadn’t gone the way they had. In some ways, that was a comfort. In others, it was a curse.

I shrugged.

“Sure. I’ve already got a place I could stay, actually. There’s a house I’ve been sitting on for a couple of years. Used to belong to an ancestor of ours, wound up in foreclosure hell, then I bought it and renovated it. I can stay there for a month.”

It suited my plans just perfectly, actually. Dear Rin-chan just gave me the excuse.

“Thanks,” she said gratefully. “That really does make me feel better about everything.”

I shouldn’t... But, well, I couldn’t resist...

“Just don’t throw any wild parties with gigantic orgies while I’m gone, okay? Not unless I’m invited.”

For a moment, she didn’t react but for her mouth dropping open a little and her eyebrows rising. Then, when the words finally registered and her brain had fully caught up with her ears, her cheeks flushed red, so bright a red that I almost expected steam to come pouring out of her ears. Ah, now *that* was the reaction I’d been looking for.

She shouted, “I-Idiot! J-just what kind of girl do you even think I am, anyway? And what’s that supposed to mean, not unless you’re invited? What kind of depraved fantasies are you cooking up in that demented brain of yours, Yukio!”

I just laughed, even as her face kept getting redder and redder. She looked so cute, all flustered like that. I just couldn’t help myself.

There were a lot of pitfalls that came with it, plenty of problems, but this was, without a doubt, the absolute best thing about being Tohsaka Rin’s twin brother: I could tease her whenever I wanted.

“Geez!” she muttered, looking away as she crossed her arms over her chest. “You really are the worst!”

“I’m seventeen years old, about three and a half weeks away from turning eighteen,” I reminded her, grinning. “The longest, most serious relationship I had was three years ago and lasted about a week. These days, most of my contact with the opposite sex involves people I can’t afford to piss off or people who would use it as an excuse either to dissect me or start a feud, if I did. In this house, with my dearest little sister, is the only place and time I can be so relaxed as to make jokes of that nature.”

“O-oh. W-well, I guess that makes...”

She shook her head violently.

“W-what am I saying?! That doesn’t make it any better at all, Yukio! I’m your sister, not some giggling schoolgirl you can charm with a smile and a few nice words! You absolutely shouldn’t be saying that sort of thing to me! H-hey, Yukio, are you even listening? Yukio!”

But I just laughed more, because I was tired and maybe a little punchy, and *god* had I missed this. Six months without Rin to tease, spending every day in the company of stuffy bluebloods who either didn’t have a sense of humor or thought me so barbaric and backwards that I was little more than a neanderthal — laughter had been in short supply.

Predictably, Rin surrendered and gave up trying to lecture me. Years of experience had told her how useless it was, but even now, her upbringing told her the proper response was a scolding.

She huffed, folding her arms over her chest. “You’re my legal guardian, so I wish you’d at least *act* like an adult.”

I let out a satisfied sigh and leaned back, draining the rest of my tea from my mug.

“That’s the great illusion about being an adult. When you’re a kid and you see your parents, your aunts and uncles, and your teachers, they all seem to know what they’re doing, like they’ve got it all figured out. When you grow up, though, you realize that no one ever really does have it all figured out, they’re just trying to get through the day without the world falling apart around them.”

I hummed. “We’re like kites, really. Some of us have strings or tails, but only a precious few have both.”

“...You stole that from an anime, didn’t you?”

I smiled at her. “Shamelessly,” I admitted.

Bebop would forever remain my favorite. A song from one of the soundtracks was even in my will, to be played at my funeral.

She let out an exasperated sigh and shook her head. “And the fact that I even recognize that means that you’ve been a bad influence on me.”

I raised an eyebrow, still smiling.

“Would you rather have no idea what a cellphone is and be incapable of using a DVD player?”

Like most magi? went unsaid.

“Sometimes, I wonder,” she retorted dryly. “Anyway. I’m not asking you to leave immediately. You just got back, after all. I’m not so cruel to ask you to pack up the minute you’ve got everything *unpacked*. But... Maybe in two weeks? The nineteenth or so?”

“That’s fine,” I said.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll be down in the workshop if you need me.”

“Shared or private?”

“Shared,” she answered. “I’m making the major preparations now, and I’ll need the room when I do the summoning. If you don’t have any objections...”

“None.”

“Good, because I would have overruled them anyway,” she said bluntly. I snorted, smirking. “What about you? Are you going to stick around and unpack or did you have some kind of other plans for today?”

“I think I’m going to head out, today, touch base with the people I haven’t seen in a while.” I stood languidly, rolling my shoulders and grunting when my spine crackled. “It *has* been six months, after all.”

“You’re not going to see one of those floozies, are you?” she asked dryly.

A startled laugh tore itself from my throat. “Floozies?”

“What else am I going to call them? All they ever want to talk with me about is you,” she grouched, then affected an exaggerated, girlish voice. “Tohsaka-san, when is Yukio-kun coming back to Fuyuki? Tohsaka-san, has Yukio-kun mentioned me? Tohsaka-san, does Yukio-kun prefer long hair or short? Tohsaka-san, what’s Yukio-kun’s favorite type of girl?”

I snorted. “Do they really ask stuff like that?”

“Incessantly!” Rin threw her hands up and made a disgusted sound in the back of her throat. “It’s like they’ve got nothing better to do! You graduated two years ago, you’d think they’d have gotten over whatever schoolgirl crush they had by now!”

“Well, I *did* graduate two years ago. They probably view that as a sign of success or something, and that’s supposed to be very appealing. Other than that, I can’t think of anything particularly special I did to earn attention like that.”

“You’d think the fact that you’re a ronin would cool some of them off. What’s the ‘official’ story now? That you’ve failed your entrance exams...I think it’s up to four times at this point, isn’t it?”

“I’m also spending months at a time outside the country, during which, for all they know, I’m off having dalliances with sexy American women or blonde German bombshells. I’m an international man of mystery, off having adventures while they spend their days sitting in a boring classroom, seeing the same sights and the same people everyday.”

The truth would bore them, I thought. Tense political negotiations with cutthroat European bluebloods could be interesting to some people, but a Japanese schoolgirl would find them terribly dull.

She shook her head. “You’re probably right. I swear, they multiplied after you graduated. Before that, I only got those questions once or twice a month. Now, I’m getting them almost daily.” She sighed. “At least Ayako is getting a kick out of it.”

My lips pursed. “Mitsuzuri?”

“Yeah.”

She arched a questioning eyebrow at me, then a catlike smile curled her mouth.

“Ah, that’s right, she used to have a crush on you, too.”

I shifted uncomfortably, grimacing. Rin laughed.

“You know she got over that almost three years ago, right?”

“You sure about that?” I mumbled.

“Definitely. These days, she does that stuff just to see you thrown off balance. Watching you get awkward and shy is hilarious.”

A melodramatic sigh left my mouth. “Ah, but my beloved sister is so cruel.”

“It could be worse,” she advised me.

“Oh?”

“You could be so dense as to completely miss the fact that a girl has a crush on you, even though she joined the Archery Club just to be close to you.”

Or that a completely different girl visits the Archery Club every morning with her best friend, just so she can watch you. Well. To be fair, Rin was also there for Sakura, but people’s motivations didn’t have to be simple or singular.

“I feel like I should stand up for Emiya, but I can’t deny that you’re right.” I shrugged. “Not everyone can be as clever as me, I suppose. Or as socially adept.”

Rin snorted, smirking.

“I hear the doubt in your voice,” I said flatly.

“I didn’t say anything!” She held up her hands in surrender.

“No, but you were thinking it. Loudly.”

“My brother can read minds! Scary, scary!”

She snickered into her hand.

“Right, I can see when I’m not wanted.”

I drained the last of my tea from my mug and stood, rolling my shoulders.

“You’re right, I should be getting on with it, too,” Rin said, once she’d contained her laughter. “Can you handle dinner for tonight?”

“I guess. How spicy do you want it, on a scale from ‘not at all’ to ‘Kirei’s mapo tofu?’”

She gagged.

“Ugh. I’m not looking to clean out my bowels tonight, so something mild is fine.”

Neither was I. Being entirely honest, Rin had a better tolerance for spicy foods than I did, even. Then again, I was addicted to sweets, so I had to guess it balanced out.

“Right. I’ll pick something up on the way home. I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Yeah, dinner.”

We separated, me heading back towards my room to get dressed and her making her way down to our workshops.

The shared and private workshops were exactly as the names implied: one workshop that Rin and I shared and separate ones we kept to ourselves. The shared one was for projects we worked on together, experiments we were both working on, and just things we were both studying. This was where Rin had taught me the basics of magecraft and where we polished up our jewel magecraft together.

Get it? Polished up?

The private ones were, as the name suggested, private, for personal projects or studies into a field of magecraft that the other didn’t know or had no aptitude for. Generally, Rin had more private projects than I did, given she was the heir and had far more training than I did, too, but I had a few things in mine that I was keeping from her.

Such as a certain journal that I hoped she never got the chance to read.

Well. Never let it be said I didn’t have contingencies, though.

Naturally, as we were magi, we respected the boundaries of those private workshops. At least in my case, I wasn’t so keen on figuring out what my sister did in hers that I was going to risk triggering one of her traps or anything, and while Rin could probably tear mine apart with impunity, the fact she didn’t said something about how much she respected me, I liked to think.

Either that, or she didn’t think there was anything worth looking at. Decent odds either way, right? I just preferred the version of things where my twin sister actually liked me.

“Well,” I said to myself with a sigh, “might as well get going, right? Places to go, people to see, projects to check up on.”

A smirk pulled at the corner of my lips as I marched up the stairs.

“I hope you’ve been keeping up with your studies, Emiya.”