

## Chapter 8: Behind the Curtain

Getting Medea on my side was going to be a long term project.

To be entirely fair, I'd known that going in. Servants answered the call in a Holy Grail War for the purpose of fulfilling a wish, desires ingrained so deeply into their beings and held so dear to their hearts that they lingered through time, space, and even beyond death itself. No matter what she said, it was never going to be as easy as using words and appeals to her innate goodness to sway her and make her give up on that wish.

Of course, then a generalization like that ran into Cúchulainn and stopped meaning anything, but by and large, it should still hold that every Servant summoned would have something they yearned to fulfill.

I had hopes, as she and I moved to the room where I had prepared my own summoning circle, that she might be swayed once she found out what hid inside the Great Grail. If anything could convince her that it wasn't worth it and nothing good would come of clinging to her wish, it would surely be the presence of such a malevolent force waiting for the ritual to complete so it could enter this world and slaughter people indiscriminately, wouldn't it? Something like that could never fulfill a wish for happiness.

Hopes... But I was under no illusions that it would be so easy to sway her, even then. It wasn't so simple to ignore the allures of your mostly deeply cherished dreams.

I wasn't lying when I told her I wanted to give her the chance to be a better person. To be who she was always meant to be, rather than the twisted wretch the gods' cruelty had made her into. But even with those pretty words, the fact I had ulterior motives for yanking Medea away from Kuzuki's path should have been obvious to everyone, even if the exact nature of those motives wasn't clear.

The value of a Caster who was considered one of the most powerful and talented spellcasters in history shouldn't need to be explained. The fact that she held that status despite not being eligible for the station of a Grand — when all of those anywhere near her level *were* — said something about her raw talent and ability. For someone like me, a third rate hack who was really good in one field and barely competent in the rest, having that sort of skill and firepower backing me up was invaluable.

I had also just recruited a healer who made me look like a fumbling child. I was trying not to think too hard about that one.

Of course, having her on my side also conveniently removed an enemy player from the field. One less Servant for me to worry about taking out, which meant that I could put more focus on the enemies that could and would very easily and mercilessly stomp me into the ground.

To my utter surprise and delight, there had already been a largely intact magic circle set up in the basement. At a guess, whichever of the Edelfelt twins (probably my grandmother) had called this place home had made use of it sixty some odd years ago to summon her own Servant for the Third Grail War, but I had no way of proving it at all.

“You already had the ritual prepared?” Medea asked as we entered the room.

“The previous owner was a participant in the Third Grail War,” I answered. “This was her base of operations for the duration, so it’s likely that she summoned her Servant here, just as a matter of convenience.”

Of course, that hit a bit of a snag, didn’t it? My understanding was that the sisters both summoned distinct aspects of the same Servant, a Saber, so it stood to reason they had actually performed their summoning at the same time in the same place. My head hurt just imagining how twisted the logistics had to be to work out any other way.

“She?” Medea echoed curiously. “You know the identity of the previous owner?”

“My grandmother,” I confirmed, and then backtracked, “or, well, I’m pretty sure it was her. Back in the Third Grail War, the Edelfelt sisters came to participate — don’t ask me why, because with that family it could have been a number of different reasons — and their lineage has a nifty little Sorcery Trait that lets them split their Thaumaturgical Crest between two heirs. They competed together, with two Sabers split between them. Fitting, if you think about it.”

Medea made an incredulous noise. “And they lost, with *two* Sabers?”

A grin cracked my face as the vacuum sealed bag opened with a hiss.

“Surrendered, more like,” I said with relish. “One of the sisters was ‘captured’ by my grandfather and fell in love. The second gave up and fled back home, swearing vengeance upon my family for their treachery. Luviagelita, the current Edelfelt heir, wants to get her family’s revenge by ‘stealing’ me from my own family.”

Medea snorted. “Well, doesn’t she sound like a lovely girl?”

I laughed. “Well, I haven’t decided whether I’ll ‘surrender’ yet or not.”

“You have a reason to debase yourself like that?”

I opened my mouth to answer her, and then I realized what a piece of ammunition I was about to give her and settled for a shrug. She was going to find out about Rin and how much I cared for my sisters eventually, but best to leave it for a time when she *wasn’t* nakedly plotting to betray me.

“There are things that being her consort would let me do that I’d have much more trouble with otherwise. Plus, I don’t know her well enough to say if her personality is as beautiful as she is.”

When I glanced over at Medea, it was to find her frowning. Whether she was just dissatisfied with my evasion, disgusted with my appreciation for Luvia’s looks, or upset that she’d missed her chance for some leverage, I didn’t know for sure, but I was willing to bet on the latter.

*Baby steps, Yukio.* Rome wasn’t built in a day. Medea wouldn’t be convinced that quickly, either.

With the shard of wood extracted, I handled it carefully and put it in place to act as my catalyst. Medea stepped back. If she weren’t so close to utterly empty of magical energy, I might have feared

she was going to stab me in the back and take my Servant's contract. Since she was barely stable, however, that sort of move would result in an instant loss for her, and I'd been very careful to ensure that state of things when I helped her.

Whatever she thought of me, I wasn't a fool. I wouldn't treat her like that fop Atrum had, but I wasn't going to just trust her without reason, either. I could give her olive branches, but it would be up to her to take them and make something of them.

Taking a deep breath, I thrust my hand out, and the image of a mirror shattering resounded in my head. Instantly, my circuits churned and circulated.

This was it.

"Thy essence is of silver and steel," I began. "Thy foundation is built of gems and the archduke of contracts. Thy ancestor is my great master, Schweinorg."

The circle began to glow, thrumming with power as the ritual took shape. I had to tamp down my excitement and force myself to keep the words slow and deliberate so that I didn't screw them up.

"Let the alighted wind be as a wall. Let the four cardinal gates be shut. Let thyself appear forth from the Crown. Let the three-forked road reaching the kingdom revolve."

The glowing circle grew brighter. A low wind, accompanying the sound of grinding steel, picked up and washed through the room.

"Let it be filled. Again. Again. Again. Again. Let there be fivefold perfections upon each repetition, simply breaking asunder upon each fulfillment. I hereby declare: let thy body rest under my dominion, and my fate shall rest in thy blade."

The glow grew brighter and brighter and brighter still. The whine of the circle and the howl of the wind grew so loud that I had to shout to even hear myself speak.

"In accordance with the call of the Holy Grail, if thou accede to this will and reason, then answer! Let this be my oath! I shall attain all the virtues of Heaven! I shall deny all the evils of Hell! Thou the Seven Heavens, clad in the Three Great Words, arrive from the Ring of Deterrence, O Keeper of Balance!"

The glow and the grinding reached a fevered pitch, and like a shadow cast upon the light, a figure grew in the center, and then at last, as the final words left my mouth, the glow and the wind surged out, washing over me, and died. Left behind was a woman, maybe an inch taller than Medea, dressed in thick, sturdy wool clothing and armored with leather and a single steel pauldron.

Her strawberry blonde hair was pulled into a tight tail at the nape of her neck, but the most striking things about her were her sharp, amethyst eyes, like shards of crystal, and the long, wicked red spear she carried in one hand.

That spear. My stomach jolted. I recognized it, even though it looked not quite the same as the version I was more familiar with.

“I am the Servant Rider,” she said in a voice that oozed regality. Soft, refined, but strong and firm. This was a woman used to giving orders and having them followed. “You. You are my Master, correct?”

A look at the back of my hand revealed the stark red Command Spells etched into it, and I couldn't stop the triumphant grin from stretching across my face.

“I am,” I told her. “You are who I think you are, right?”

*Aife in Sochraid?* I projected at her as coherently as I could.

She arched an eyebrow, and her voice responded in my head, *Your Old Irish needs work, Master. I'll forgive your butchering of my mother tongue on account only that it isn't spoken anymore.*

Aloud, she added, “My spear shall be with you from henceforth. Our contract is set.”

*Now*, something like motherly impatience colored her tone, and her gaze moved to Medea, *maybe you would like to explain why you have another Servant here?*

Ah, right.

I turned back to Medea and offered her my hand. “Caster. This shall be our oath. Thy body shall rest under my dominion...”

She stared at me for a long moment, silent, her brow knit and her eyes narrowed, her mouth pulled into a thin line. I could only imagine what must have been going through her head, and I doubted any of it was particularly flattering to me.

“You're a fool,” she finally spat.

“Maybe,” I replied, “but I'm a fool willing to believe in your innate goodness. If all I believed was that you were an obstacle and an irredeemable wretch, I would have slit your throat while you were helpless and watched you die.”

At last, she sighed and reached out to grasp my hand. Quietly, she said, “And your fate shall rest with me.”

The contract settled with a flare of pain in my Command Spells, and suddenly, a bottomless abyss was attempting to drink of my magical energy. I let her have as much of it as I could spare, and I watched her take in a deep breath as her own power started to return to her.

Behind me, Aife remained tense. Waiting.

At length, Medea said, “I believe you promised to explain things, after you summoned your Servant.”

“I did.”

I retrieved the shard of wood that had served as my catalyst, and Aife's eyes followed it as I put it back into the bag it had come in. Well, strictly speaking, it had come in a box meant to preserve it,

but the bag was easier to carry around, so I'd put it there until I was done with it. No sense getting the Department of Archaeology on my back for damaging a priceless relic.

"Let's adjourn to the sitting room," I said, "and I'll explain everything I can to both of you."

Up the stairs we went, my two Servants following behind, with Aífe in the very rear. It seemed she didn't trust Medea at all, and while that was convenient in some ways, I was going to need them to work together in the days ahead, and distrust was going to make that difficult.

I led them to the sitting room and bade them to take a seat while I went and conjured up a pot of tea, and about ten minutes later, I returned to find them silent, staring at each other without blinking. Medea was still sipping deep of the well of my reserves, trying to restore her own depleted energy.

A mug was poured for each of us, with sugar and cream left out to be used as they pleased. For a change, I'd made a pot of Irish tea, in deference to the Irishwomen who were calling this place home, for now. Aífe didn't comment on it, but I probably should have expected that, because tea didn't become a commonly consumed beverage in the British Isles until well after her own era.

After taking a few sips and letting the warmth settle in my gut, I reclined in my chair, folded my legs, and regarded the both of them.

"So," I said, "let's start off with a bit of a history lesson."

"A history lesson?" Medea asked. "What does that have to do with anything?"

I nodded. "Yes. The current problems with the Holy Grail War as it exists today stem back to the previous ritual some sixty or so years ago."

"Problems?" Aífe demanded sharply.

My finger tapped against the rim of my cup.

"The Grail is a monkey's paw," I told her bluntly. "Any wish made on it will be twisted to cause as much destruction as possible. More to the point, if the Grail itself is allowed to reach completion, that thing hiding inside of it will come out and destroy mankind."

The two of them reacted the only way they really could have to that proclamation: stunned silence.

"As I said," I went on. "History lesson. I don't know all the details, but during the Third Grail War, the Einzberns, one of the three families who helped build this whole thing, got impatient with the ritual failing over and over again, so they tried to cheat and game the system. They attempted to use a backdoor hack to call an ancient god of darkness and evil, something so powerful that it could crush the competition. They got a scrawny young man so weak that Assassin could kill him in a straight fight."

Aífe leaned forward, interested. "And this scrawny young man, there's a reason that the Einzberns' attempt to call a god of darkness summoned him instead?"

“I don’t know all the details,” I demurred, repeating myself. “What I do know is that this young man was a ritual sacrifice from an ancient culture, a scapegoat meant to bear the sins of mankind in order to purge his tribe of evil. When an existence imagined for the sole purpose of granting his people’s wish for an ultimate evil was killed and entered the Grail…”

Medea snorted and broke out into cackles. “They broke their own system!”

“The Grail is an omnipotent wish-granting device,” I agreed. “When a wish entered the system itself, the Grail attempted to grant it. Something, however, has always prevented it from reaching fruition. In the Third, the vessel for containing the power of the defeated Servants was broken halfway through. In the Fourth, ten years ago, the winner realized the tragedy that would occur if he made a wish and destroyed the Lesser Grail right as the ritual was on the cusp of completion. That’s why it only took ten years for the Fifth to be ready.”

“And what will stop it in the Fifth?” Medea asked. “You do know, don’t you, *Master*? You’ve already told me how I might die, so surely you can answer that much, as well.”

I slanted a look her way, grimacing, and took another long sip of me tea.

“Alright,” I said. “It’s not the neatest segue, but I might as well take it. So let’s get to another history lesson and fast forward to ten years ago, in the middle of the Fourth Grail War. The Caster of that War was a man named Gilles de Rais using the alias Bluebeard, summoned by a serial killer using the blood of his victims. Bluebeard and his Master had no real interest in the War itself or the Grail, so they used the opportunity to indulge in their darker proclivities. They focused mainly on kidnapping children, taking them back to Caster’s workshop in the sewers, and using them as ritual sacrifices to summon monstrosities from outside our reality.”

Medea’s lip curled with disgust and Aífe’s expression hardened.

“A pair like *that* was allowed to participate in the Grail War?”

I shrugged. “The Grail is relatively indiscriminate, these days. Bluebeard’s Master was the only remaining candidate with the capacity to become a Master, one would assume, so he got the position by default. He had a vague wish and access to the ritual, whether or not he knew exactly what he was doing or what he got himself into, so he was as good as any other random candidate.”

“A tragedy, to be sure, what happened to those children,” said Medea, “but how exactly is this relevant to your impossible knowledge?”

A sigh hissed out of my nostrils, and I set my tea down long enough to look at them both.

“One of those children,” I revealed gravely, “was me.”

Both of them jerked and regarded me with wide eyes.

“You escaped, obviously,” said Aífe. “Or else you wouldn’t be here now.”

“I was rescued,” I corrected her with a shake of my head. A brief flash of memory flitted through my head, of a white-haired man with a drawn face and one blind eye hovering over me. Uncle

Kariya. “But the trinket Bluebeard made for his Master to use to ensnare his victims wasn’t intended for use on magi, and the trauma of the event forced my Magic Circuits open. I was in a coma for at least a week.”

A deep breath filled my lungs, and behind my eyelids, I saw an expanse of white, filled only with a small bookshelf and a pair of plush armchairs. The sad smile of a young man, trapped in that place.

“While I was out, I dreamed visions of possible futures. A fractal kaleidoscope of what the Fifth Holy Grail War would have been, had I died that day.”

“Dreams?” Medea asked incredulously. “You’re basing the entirety of this all on dreams you had as a child.”

“You’re not voicing any doubts I haven’t questioned myself,” I told her. “But I’ve since come across proof. The fact you’re sitting here instead of up at the temple should tell you that much.”

She recoiled, flinching as though I’d slapped her.

I reached for my bag and pulled out a folder, then flipped the folder open and started placing the pictures inside on the coffee table sat in front of us. Each of them was labeled with their name.

“Prior to those dreams, I had never met the majority of these people. But over the course of the last ten years, not only have I met most of them, I can confirm that they all exist and at least one of them is a Master in the Fifth Grail War.”

Emiya Shirou. Kotomine Kirei. Bazett Fraga McRemitz. My sister, Rin. Matou Shinji. I hadn’t been able to get a picture of Illya, but a vague sketch depicted her silvery hair and red eyes clearly. Zouken, as well, merely because I hadn’t dared to try and get a picture of him. The only reason I had one of Kirei was because Kirei was enough of a public figure that I’d been able to snag one without arousing suspicion.

“Most of these are just kids,” Aífe muttered, taking the picture of Shirou.

“Illyasviel is the Master of Berserker, Herakles, and older than she looks. If she hasn’t shown up yet, she’s on her way here now,” I said. “Matou Shinji is a conditional Master, but I’ve changed enough that I have reason to believe his grandfather, Zouken,” and here, I pointed to Zouken’s sketch, “will decide to get involved personally. He’s the founder I mentioned earlier, Caster.”

She blinked and tentatively picked up Zouken’s sketch.

“You called him a founder,” she murmured. “If the normal amount of time between Grail Wars is sixty years, then he would have to be...at least three hundred years old.”

“At least,” I agreed.

Her lips puckered thoughtfully. “Time has not treated him kindly.”

“In more ways than one.”

I took another sip on that thought and continued.

“Bazett Fraga McRemitz is currently resting upstairs in one of the guest bedrooms in a medically induced coma. She was Lancer’s original Master.”

Both of them turned suddenly to look at me again.

“Original?” Medea asked.

“She trusted the wrong man.” I tapped Kirei’s picture. “Kotomine Kirei, a participant in the previous War, lopped off her arm and stole her Command Spells right as Lancer manifested. Incidentally, Caster can also confirm that *her* previous Master, Atrum Galliasta, is dead. That’s why I didn’t bother getting a picture of him.”

Medea startled. Ah, still doubting me, was she?

“Yes,” she confirmed bitterly. “Yes, he is.”

Aífe eyed her for a moment, and then nodded. “You killed him yourself.”

Medea didn’t say anything to that at all. I decided to respect her privacy and not talk about what little I knew of the circumstances that had led to that fiasco. Even my picture of them was fragmented and incomplete, but I still had enough to know he was an utter piece of excrement not fit to be wiped off my boot. All the arrogance, narcissism, and exaggerated self-importance of the worst of the Clocktower with none of the skill, talent, or lineage to back any of it up.

“Lancer’s true name is Cúchulainn.” Aífe startled at that one, looking utterly gobsmacked. “He’s accepted Kirei as his Master for lack of another choice, but he has enough lines that Kirei is all too willing to tapdance over that their compatibility is absolutely horrid. If he isn’t taken out until the end, Cúchulainn will eventually rebel when he’s given an order he refuses to follow. The real threat Kirei poses comes down to two issues in particular: firstly, the excess Command Spells leftover from previous rituals, collected from the Masters after it was over. I shouldn’t need to explain why those are an issue. Secondly, he’s kept in his employ — for lack of a better word — the Archer class Servant with whom he conspired to kill my father ten years ago.”

“Ten years — you mean he’s a holdover from the previous Grail War?” asked Aífe.

“He’s the Servant originally summoned by my father, using the shed skin of the first snake as a catalyst.” I looked pointedly at Medea. “King Gilgamesh of Uruk. The first and original hero. He who collected all the treasures of the world, and who therefore possesses every Noble Phantasm ever recorded.”

“What?!”

But it was not Medea that burst out of her seat, an incredulous shout on her tongue, it was Aífe.

“That’s ludicrous!” she spat. “A single Heroic Spirit cannot possess limitless Noble Phantasms!”



Calmly, I retrieved another sheet of paper and handed it to her. She took it as though it was a venomous snake that might bite her at any moment and carefully read the fragmented dossier I'd constructed of Gilgamesh and his skills and Noble Phantasms.

"He owns every Noble Phantasm to ever exist," I reiterated, "but strictly speaking, there are really only two or three that belong solely to him. The Gate of Babylon, his treasure room where he keeps them all. Sha Naqba Imuru, his unique form of Clairvoyance. But the one which none of us could hope to combat is the third, a nameless weapon that can't even really be called a sword. He calls it Ea, the Sword of Rupture."

Aífe's eyes went wide as she came to that entry and read exactly what that weapon was. I couldn't blame her. My previous self had thought it a uniquely "cool" weapon, but for me, it had been nothing except a source of some of my worst nightmares.

"You said," Medea muttered quietly, "that of the three, Herakles was the one I might survive."

"He is," I answered her solemnly. "You can't beat him, but you might at least convince his Master to retreat. His Noble Phantasm gives him immunity to any attack or Noble Phantasm below the rank of A along with a stock of twelve resurrections from death. Even if you kill him once or twice, he'll eventually develop an immunity, and while your magic is strong, I have serious doubts that you have twelve different kinds of magic all strong enough to kill him."

And then I delivered the fatal blow.

"In one version of events, Gilgamesh toyed with Herakles and killed him twelve times without breaking a sweat or using Ea."

It was a scene that would stick with me, no matter what. One of the handful that stood out, even after ten years. Herakles, hanging limply from the Chains of Heaven, skewered with numerous Noble Phantasms, defeated — and suddenly surging to life in defiance of his limits in order to protect his Master.

"He killed *Herakles*?" Medea asked, her voice an octave higher than usual.

"Without much effort at all," I confirmed.

She slumped back, mouth flapping silently. I could understand the trouble she was having. Especially for someone who had been around him and known him, someone who had borne witness to his deeds, the idea of Herakles being tossed around like a child was a frightening idea.

I turned to Aífe.

"I guess now's as good a time as any to ask: what is it you would have wished for?"

She regarded me coolly, one side of her mouth pulling up in a smirk.

"If you're asking me whether I covet the Grail and its powers of wish-granting, you can rest easy, Master," she said. "I've no need of that trinket to grant my wish. In fact, it would make things far too easy, and there's no challenge in being handed what I want, corrupted Grail or not." She

frowned. “It seems my odds of having a wish granted are fairly low, even if I had. I would love to match fists with Herakles, but an enemy who can trivialize even a legend as strong as him...”

“Fortunately, Gilgamesh won’t get involved without reason,” I told her. “Unless something happens to get him to stop fence-sitting, he’ll spectate until at least the latter half of the War.”

She snorted and smirked again. “There’s no way to be sure of that now, is there? After all, you said that the events you envisioned took place in a world where you hadn’t survived that night ten years ago, and that means a world where you weren’t there to summon me. Correct?”

I reclined back in my chair and took another sip of my tea. “The Rider Servant of that version of events was Medusa, under Matou Shinji,” I said by way of confirmation. “Without the Rider class, the odds are decently strong that Zouken himself will just butt into the War and summon Hassan of the Cursed Arm. It’s one of the few things completely up in the air before Saber’s summoning in about a week and a half.”

“Saber?” Medea jumped back in.

I leaned over long enough to tap Shirou’s picture. “If all goes according to schedule — and according to plan — he’ll summon King Arthur.”

“Lancer, Berserker, Saber, Assassin,” Aífe mused aloud, “and you have Rider and Caster right here. So if Berserker is Herakles, Saber is King Arthur, Assassin might be Hassan of the Cursed Arm, and Lancer is Cúchulainn, who does that leave in the Archer class? Or has Gilgamesh retained that spot?”

I tapped Rin’s picture this time. “The three founding families are guaranteed a slot in each Grail War. The Tohsaka representative this time will accidentally summon an Archer. Who she gets is a bit hard to explain, but the basic gist is that he’s a nameless Guardian with the ability to replicate any bladed weapon he lays eyes on. That includes Noble Phantasms.”

But this was evidently the final straw, at least for one of them.

“Oh, this is ridiculous!” Medea burst out, throwing up her hands. “*Two* Servants with functionally limitless Noble Phantasms at their beck and call? The greatest hero of Greece? The oldest recorded hero ever put to clay and stone? And we’re to take all of this at your word that it comes from a bunch of prophetic dreams you had as a child ten years ago?”

I stared at her for a long moment, because when I thought about it, it really was kind of hard to believe, wasn’t it? Even for what and who she was. And then I sighed and leveraged myself out of my seat, draining the last of my tea and setting the cup on the table. “Alright. It looks like a field trip is in order.”

“What?” Medea asked incredulously.

“A field trip?” Aífe asked with one raised brow.

“We’re going to Shinto, just across the bridge,” I said. A grimace stretched tight over my lips. “I’m going to show you where the contents of the Grail spilled out into Fuyuki at the end of the last War.”