

Chapter 11: Prognosis I

Fortunately, my inattention had not cost Bazett her life.

It had not done anything to *improve* it, either. She had recovered some of her color, but she was still a little anemic — and no wonder, with how much blood she had lost. It was still something of a minor miracle that she hadn't bled out before I could make it to her.

Magic Crests were bullshit.

She was healthy enough that I could have brought her out of her coma and let her sleep the rest of it off, but that wasn't part of the plan, so I let her sleep the sleep of the heavily medicated for a little while longer.

I wasn't one-hundred percent sure when I would actually wake her. There were spells to deal with the unpleasant parts of a coma patient, particularly things like muscle atrophy, but it wasn't like I could wait until the night before the final battle and expect that to go over well in any way at all.

"So," Medea's voice purred, and I nearly jumped out of my skin, "this is your so-called contingency plan for this Kirei fellow that frightens you so much?"

"After a fashion," I said, refusing to look back at her, like I had known she was there all along. "I had to reattach her arm and she lost a lot of blood, so for now, I'm keeping her asleep."

Had I already mentioned that part? I'd lost track. There was so much we'd crammed into the last few hours that I honestly couldn't remember all of the details we'd gone over, and I'd been practicing this for so long that it was hard to separate what I'd actually said from what I'd been imagining I would say for almost ten years.

"You know, I could heal her instantly, if you like," Medea offered silkily. "It would be no trouble at all, Master. She could be up and getting ready with us with just a few short words. It wouldn't even require that much mana."

And then there would be little to nothing stopping her from charging off to go after Kirei, or worse, making up plans of her own that would get tangled up with mine. She had even less reason to trust me than Medea and Aífe, and the last thing I needed was her and Medea conspiring together whenever I was out of earshot.

I hadn't lied about what I hoped for Medea to get out of all of this, but I wasn't fool enough to give her another perfectly viable Master candidate she could run to this early in the game.

"No," I said aloud, and I gave her a totally true reason without revealing all of it. "My plans are delicate enough as it is, vague as they might be in general, and I don't need a walking complication to be up and about early enough to screw them all up."

Done with checking up on my patient, I stood up from her bedside and rolled my shoulders. There was a series of satisfying crackles from between my shoulderblades.

“It’s almost like you don’t think she’d agree to go along with them,” Medea mocked me.

“I don’t,” I agreed. “Frankly, I don’t know much about her aside from her name, a vague idea of her skillset, and a few minor details about her relationship with Kirei. To be honest, Medea, as long as she has more options, I don’t trust her to do anything but leave as soon as she gets her bearings. So I want to make sure she doesn’t *have* any better options than to stay with us.”

Medea cut right to the issue: “Manipulate her, you mean.”

“Isn’t that how all forms of negotiation work?” I countered, channeling my sister’s nonchalance. “Besides which, if she left us now, she’d be as good as dead. Her Command Spells have already been stolen, her Servant is calling the man who stole them ‘Master,’ and the only thing she’d accomplish by going after them is being forced to fight her former Servant to the death while Kirei smiles from the sidelines.”

A grim fate, no matter how you sliced it. Better, maybe, than what little I remembered of her story, but then, what wasn’t better than being forced into a time loop with no apparent way out where even death itself served as no reprieve?

“And if by some miracle she made it through all of that, a golden king would cut her down like a rabid dog?” Medea asked.

“And he wouldn’t think anything of it.”

If Kirei didn’t dismantle her himself. She was the better fighter these days, perhaps, but Kirei’s weapons weren’t just his fists or his Black Keys. He was also well-practiced in the art of ripping people apart and tearing them down with just his words.

“How convenient,” Medea said scathingly. “It just so happens that her doing things your way is for her own good, is it?”

I couldn’t help snorting, and that seemed to throw her off.

“What?”

“I’m not going to pretend I don’t benefit from this,” I told her. “Frankly, if it was just about Bazett’s own good? I’d bundle her up and ship her off on the next, most convenient flight back to Ireland, where she’d be safe, healthy, and able to recover without any of the burdens of the rest of this War.”

You could even say it was the most ethical decision, from the position of a physician. Say that five times fast.

“But there are no guarantees in this Grail War,” I went on. “Even if we do everything I’ve said to prepare, that might not be enough, and we might all die without accomplishing anything. If Illya and Herakles come for us too early, if Zouken catches on, if Kirei catches on, if Gilgamesh catches on — any one of them catching us before we’re ready will likely result in the three of us getting killed.”

Unfortunately, I wasn't a physician. I hadn't gotten a medical license. I had sworn no Hippocratic Oath. Medicinal magecraft only made me better able to keep myself and my sisters alive, and it did not come with any other rules or regulations that restricted how I could act.

"And so you'll conscript her into a fight that isn't hers?" Medea bit out.

"Isn't it?"

The nightgown I'd dressed Bazett in after I got up this morning came from this mansion's storage, which meant it was probably my grandmother's, and it came with long sleeves. I pulled the sleeve of the left arm up, past her elbow, until the red ring of my less than perfect reattachment was visible. For how rushed I'd been, I liked to think I'd done a fairly good job of it, even though I could well acknowledge that a more experienced healer would have done it perfectly.

There were also the fading remnants of a bruise on the back of her hand from where Kirei had carelessly ripped out her Command Spells, but I couldn't do anything about those. I was better at physical surgery than the spiritual kind he employed.

"She came to Fuyuki for the purposes of participating in the Holy Grail War," I reasoned. "In so doing, she trusted her back to Kotomine Kirei, who is not only supposed to be an impartial arbiter of this contest, but also a comrade in arms who she has fought beside. I would say this is very much her fight, and I will be giving her the chance to rejoin it from a position of greater strength."

"In a way that benefits *you*."

"And you," I countered. "And Rider, and Fuyuki, and the whole world and everyone in it, if you expand outwards on the ramifications of what happens if we need her and she isn't there to help."

It shouldn't need to be restated: the Grail could not be allowed to manifest. Angra Mainyu could not be allowed to be born. Kirei would not stop until he'd received the answer he wanted from that outcome, and so Kirei had to be killed to prevent an unconscionable amount of lives from being lost, starting with this city of over a million people.

I slid the sleeve back down over Bazett's arm.

And then, I took a gamble. "To tell you the truth, Medea, I'm terrified. I'm dancing along a knife's edge, playing in a game where it seems like I'm the only one who truly understands the stakes that would care to do anything about them. If I make the wrong mistake at the wrong time, then I'm dooming not only the world, but everyone in it that I actually care about."

There was something of a relief in finally saying it. In admitting that I was one man trying to fight the apocalypse, and if I screwed up, then the world was fucked. To finally *share* with someone who knew what I was even talking about and would take it seriously. But this moment of vulnerability was also a manipulation — to open myself up, even just this tiny bit, and extend a modicum of trust to a woman who was used to receiving none.

I couldn't be sure I wasn't rushing it. This wasn't a video game with a dialogue tree with clear choices and fairly obvious "correct" paths. No Paragon points or Renegade points, no flashing indicators or colored text, only me and my inherited understanding of human psychology.

There was no response. I didn't dare to look directly at her, not if it risked giving away my intentions.

"I don't have the luxury of being nice to everyone or doing what's best for them," I went on, hardening my voice deliberately. "Where and how I can, I have to close down their options to the ones that will work best for me."

"Then what you said earlier was a lie," she countered frostily. "You don't want me to be 'true to myself,' as you put it. You just want me to do what you tell me to do."

I smiled.

"I didn't, actually. Lie, that is." Now, I turned to face her. "I planned around finding you, yes. I even have a few ulterior motives for it, too, and you're not wrong to say I benefit from having you as an ally."

She snorted derisively.

"But you weren't *necessary*," I told her. "As long as I got the Rider Servant I needed, I could have left you to reach the Temple and inevitably die. Entirely ignorant of the threats you would have faced, one way or another, you wouldn't have made it to the end of this War. But...that was just too sad, don't you think?"

A woman who had never been able to hold her own happiness in her hands... Yes, there was no way I could have stood by to let her die so terribly again. Rin wasn't quite as empathetic as I was, I could freely admit, but even she had sacrificed her most precious gemstone for the sake of saving Emiya Shirou. Or would do so in the future, rather.

"And I'm to believe that it was...what? Sentiment that led you to seek me out?" Medea sneered. "You admit you're manipulating us for your own ends, and then you expect me to believe that you came to me because you're just that soft-hearted?"

"Is it *that* hard to believe?" I countered. "Remember, I already know how this Holy Grail War is supposed to end. Couldn't I have just left it to go the way it was meant to and gone somewhere safe and secure to wait it out?"

Her brow furrowed.

"I'm here to correct a few injustices that would have remained unaddressed." I gestured towards Bazett. "And to save a few lives that would have been lost, or ended in tragedy. Like yours." I sighed. "But getting involved means I have to play for keeps. It means I have to do triage and decide who I prioritize to what degree, because I can't save everyone."

"And I suppose a witch like me is very far down on that list, aren't I?" she demanded acidly.

"How am I supposed to answer that?" I retorted calmly. "Medea, if I lied, you would hate me, and if I told you the truth, you wouldn't believe it. Nothing I say could change your mind either way."

Tamping down on the heat in my gut was hard, but a skill I'd won from years of practice, first in high school and later at the Clock Tower. Snapping at her and getting angry wouldn't make Medea any more likely to listen to me.

Not that she seemed particularly inclined to do that anyway.

She scowled, and then, after a moment, she abruptly disappeared and left. I could only guess that she hadn't had a response to that, not one that she thought didn't sound petulant or childish. She seemed determined to see the worst in me, and while I liked to think I was a decent enough person, I couldn't say she was entirely wrong to think so, either.

A bout of weariness struck me, and I felt more like seventy than seventeen. The weight of all the compromises and lesser evils I'd had to choose to make it even this far was like a leaden cloak around my shoulders.

I was playing chess with people's lives. Even if I was well aware of the gravity of my decisions and what they would mean for the people they affected, it didn't change the fact that I was indeed manipulating them for my own ends. Altruism or not.

A sigh whistled past my lips, and I looked down at my unconscious patient.

“You understand why I'm doing things this way. Don't you?”

She didn't respond, because she couldn't, and right then, a thread of real guilt wormed its way through my belly.

Screw it. I could leave the big, moralistic questions for the morning, when I was better rested.

— o.O.O.O.o —

A good night's sleep did not magically solve all of my problems, not even a little bit, but I felt much better prepared to face them than I had when I went to bed. The wonders of being well-rested did not begin or end at the physical...or something like that.

I went about my morning rituals as I usually did. I woke up, caught a quick shower, ate a breakfast and drank a mug of tea that jolted me awake with a shot of caffeine, and I was just about to leave and head on over to take my sister to school when I caught sight of the red pattern stamped across the back of my hand like a tattoo. My Command Spells, the marks of mastership.

In other words, the deadeast of dead giveaways that I was officially a Master in the Fifth Holy Grail War.

There was no way that Rin wouldn't recognize them for what they were. No, she was way too smart for that. The instant she saw them, she would know exactly what they were and what they meant, and so many of my plans would be blown to kingdom come. Unraveled, before the War itself even officially started.

Damn it.

My first instinct was to go to my phone, call up my sister, and make up some excuse for why I couldn't take her to school. Maybe that I had caught something on my trip to England and wasn't feeling well, or maybe that I'd been busy yesterday and woken up late, so I wouldn't be able to meet her in time to take her to school. Maybe I could just say that I was going to be too busy *today* to take the time out to go with her.

But the squirming feeling in my gut wouldn't let me do things the easy way. Not for Rin. Not for this. These may well have been the last days I would ever spend with her, the last memories I would ever make of the sister I loved more than life itself, and I didn't want to regret that I hadn't spent more time with her, just in case one of us didn't make it out of this thing alive.

Of the two of us, I was the one more likely to die, in that case.

So I went and I found a pair of gloves, a comfortable, well-made leather set that I'd bought in England out of an abundance of caution and not a little paranoia, and I slipped them on before I slid into my coat. The boy in the mirror suddenly looked more like a young man, closer to the mental image I had of myself — that is, of the past self I had inherited ten years ago.

I was on my way out the door when the most predictable thing ever happened: one of my Servants stopped me.

“Going somewhere?” Aife asked as she shimmered into existence.

Double damn it. Of course one of them would notice I was leaving and come to see where I was going and why. No Servant worth their salt would pay so little attention to their Master as to completely miss that he was about to head out someplace on his own.

It was just fortunate that Aife was the one who had come to check. Medea would have been far more suspicious and far harder to deal with.

“The same place I go every morning,” I answered, deliberately vague.

“Without one of us to protect you?” She lifted one eyebrow. “After all that trouble you went through to tell us about how dangerous things are, you're going out alone?”

Well, yes, but if I worried about all of the things that could kill me every time I stepped out of the door, I wouldn't even leave my bed in the morning.

“The first and biggest clue that something's happened will be changing my routine,” I told her. “So the best way to throw off anyone who might suspect I've become a Master is to act like I haven't. You're welcome to come along, in spirit form,” I added. “Just as long as you don't give yourself away.”

She frowned, and then her form shimmered again as she disappeared. I couldn't see her, I couldn't sense her, but I got the feeling she was still there, regardless, and that she was going to follow me while I went to meet up with Rin.

It wasn't like I could stop her, not without a Command Spell, and that would be such a colossal waste that I didn't even entertain the idea longer than it took for it to pop into my head. Besides, of

the two, Aífe was the more straightforward, prone to facing her enemies head-on, so she was the one I thought I could trust with this secret more, and that was why I actually wasn't all that bothered to have her with me.

She also wasn't the one with a Noble Phantasm that could break her own contract with me. It was a little easier to share vulnerabilities when I didn't have to worry that she was going to go off and find a new Master the instant one tempting enough presented herself.

My shoes were the last thing I slipped on, and then I was out the door and making my way over to my family's ancestral home. Aífe trailed me silently all the while, keeping an eye out for enemy Masters and Servants, but I wasn't worried. I was the last person anyone would suspect, after all, and I'd made sure to convince all the usual players of it. And besides that, there were almost no other competitors who would actually risk an attack in broad daylight. Not in the city itself.

To my delight, my dearest sister was waiting for me on the street right outside our house's bounded field. I couldn't help the smile that broke out across my face.

"Good morning!" I told her brightly.

"Just when I thought I could go a day without you embarrassing me," she retorted dryly.

"You say that, but you *were* waiting for me," I said slyly.

"O-of course I was!" She huffed. The tips of her ears were turning red. "It's more trouble than it's worth to deal with that disappointed puppy face you would have given me if I left without you!"

"Disappointed puppy?"

"Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about." She looked away. "You've been using it on me ever since we were, like, six years old, and you always get me to do things your way when you look at me like that."

My smile grew broader.

"Really, now? Is that the secret to convincing Tohsaka Rin of my brilliance? I just have to look like a disappointed puppy?"

She rolled her eyes. "It's just so pathetic that I can't help but feel bad about it, so I wind up going against my better judgment."

I laughed, unbothered. "Well, you need to get to school either way, so we should get going to make sure you're not late."

I offered her my arm, but she just raised one of her eyebrows at me. "Really? You don't remember what I told you before? We're not walking together arm in arm."

She deliberately switched her grip on her school bag so that it was in the hand that would face me when we started walking. I shrugged.

“Have it your way.”

We set off as the winter sun struggled its way into the sky. The clouds still covered it up above, leaving the whole city cast in a sort of twilight, like it was closer to midnight than morning. With Rin there by my side, I was struck by a sudden intense longing, a nostalgia for the days several years back when she and I had actually gone to school together.

Of course, I hadn't wanted to spend any single day more than I had to in high school, so I just had to go and test out. Most of the high school experience was happily left behind, but the sense of normalcy that came with going to the same place every day and seeing the same people, I had to admit that I missed it.

So, this is what you were trying to hide from Caster. Aífe's voice inserted itself into my head so suddenly and so unexpectedly that I very nearly jumped out of my skin.

“Something wrong?” Rin asked from next to me.

“Just had a scary thought,” I told her with a smile and a little laugh.

She raised one eyebrow at me again, but let it go. “If you say so.”

I don't know what you mean, I told Aífe.

Please, she retorted, do you really think either of you were being subtle? A child could have seen that neither of you really trusts the other.

My lips pursed, but I refrained from commenting. Anything I said to deny it would probably be painfully obvious as a lie.

And you said a lot about these dreams of yours and the identities of the other Servants, she went on, but I noticed you said nothing of Caster's identity. That means that either you don't know it, which I doubt, or you do and think it would prejudice us against each other.

Aífe, it turned out, was actually pretty smart, not a blunt, bullheaded battle junkie. My, but what else had the legends failed to mention?

Her legend isn't kind to her, I replied neutrally.

The latter, then, she concluded. I won't demand you tell me who. It's enough to know that it puts this much distance between you.

It's not about her, I said, coming to Medea's defense, because it really wasn't. Not totally, at least. *It's about the Grail. She has a wish. I can't afford to put my trust in a Servant who seeks the Grail. Not until she's given me reason to.*

You trusted me, she pointed out. *At least enough to reveal this weakness of yours. Lover? No, sister. I can see the resemblance between the two of you. Especially in the eyes — that shade of blue is quite striking.*

That's different, I protested.

It is, she acknowledged readily. That is, if you're willing to believe that I have no wish for the Grail.

Ironically enough, the fact that she'd even brought it up just convinced me of it even more.

I have no reason not to, I told her. After all, there isn't much in your legend you could want to change, and the only thing I can think of that wouldn't cause you even more pain is... Well...

My son, she finished for me. It's not that it isn't tempting, but... No. You can rest easy, Master. My wish is simple and one I must grant with my own hands: I want to train a student who can surpass Cúchulainn.

I put two and two together and nearly stumbled over my own feet. *That's a little much to be putting on my shoulders, don't you think?*

"You sure you're alright, Yukio?" Rin asked me.

"I'm fine," I reassured her. "I think I'm still a little asleep, though. I had a late night."

She snorted. "And I thought *I* was the one who had trouble with mornings."

"We *are* twins, after all."

You were the one who said you wanted me to teach you my martial arts, Aífe said, sounding amused.

There's a difference between that and expecting you to make me better than the Irish version of Herakles! I said.

Well, there's the question of whether it can be done in the span of a single month, even by a teacher as talented as I am, she said wryly. *However, Master, is the prospect truly so daunting that you're not even willing to try?*

What a loaded question that was. The Japanese in me was ready to deny it — outside of manga, it was generally considered brash, rude, and downright arrogant to be prideful or brag. Forgetting that, the measuring stick she was threatening to put me against was a guy both clever and strong enough to stall Gilgamesh for *half a day*. Even the parts of me I'd inherited from my past self were tempted to laugh it off as impossible.

But...

I suppose that would make me your last disciple, wouldn't it? I asked her.

If I wasn't willing to greedily reach for everything I could, then might as well just give up right there. I couldn't afford to take half measures, not at the level Grail Wars played out on. I had already resigned myself to the likelihood that I wasn't going to live past this one, but there were people I cared about that I absolutely needed to make it out of this. People it was worth putting myself through hell for, people I wanted to save.

Wasn't that why I had committed to rescuing Medea? Back then, I thought, 'I want to save her.' If I was truly so half-hearted about this, then I would have given up the instant she bit back at me.

Then I will expect nothing less than your utmost commitment, Yukio, she said.

No pressure, huh? But...nothing worth achieving was ever truly accomplished without effort. For Rin's sake, for Sakura's, for Medea's, and even for Shirou's, I could put myself through whatever hell Aífe concocted, if it meant I was strong enough to protect them.

Eventually, the trip had to end, and the school gate with all of its arriving students soon came into sight.

"You've been quiet, today," Rin commented.

"I have a lot on my mind," I admitted. It had the benefit of even being true.

She snorted. "Who is she?"

"You, of course," I told her bluntly and honestly. Her cheeks bloomed red.

"That wasn't funny the first time," she said tersely, "and it's not funny now."

"Who's joking?" I asked rhetorically. "My beloved sister is soon to be entering a battle royale with her life on the line. Of course I'm worried."

Her cheeks turned even redder. "Well, you don't need to. I have no intention of dying in the Grail War."

"Neither did Father," I retorted quietly.

And he'd died anyway, stabbed in the back by the man he'd entrusted with his own safety as part of a conspiracy with the Servant he had summoned to fight for his wish. The man who should have been safest in the whole Grail War died just the same as any other, and his children were even now paying for it.

She didn't have an answer to that. I let out a long sigh.

"I'm not going to try to convince you not to take part," I began. "It's important to you. I get it. You feel like you have to compete. I really do understand. Even so..."

I trailed off impotently, unable to find the words to finish my thought. Asking her to promise she would come back alive... It just felt like I would be tempting fate. Asking her to be careful felt the same way. Like I'd come this far by avoiding treating the entire situation as seriously as it warranted with her, so the instant I did, I'd be dooming her.

The image of her, collapsed against a blood-spattered wall, was one of my worst nightmares. Having the flesh and blood Rin right in front of me and seeing the inside of Emiya's home had replaced the simplified, stylized anime figures with the real thing, a horrific tableau of my sister, pale and lifeless on the wooden floor, her trademark sweater wet and sticky as it clung to the wound Kirei had torn into her belly.

The possibility of that becoming real terrified me, and I fully expected that scene to visit me in my dreams at least once over the next month.

“I won’t leave you alone,” she replied just as quietly. And then, with inflated bravado, “Besides, you don’t have anything to worry about, do you? Naturally, I’m going to summon the best Servant, so I’ll never be in any real danger to begin with.”

I laughed, but my heart wasn’t totally in it. Not when I’d seen all of the horrible things that could happen to her in just the version of things I remembered clearset. “Of course. As expected of Tohsaka Rin.”

“That’s right! Just who did you think you were dealing with? Shinji?”

The laugh that one startled out of me was a little more genuine. “Never!”

We parted ways shortly before the school gate, where Mitsuzuri was waiting. I made a quick detour to check up on Sakura, mindful of my Command Spells — if they started throbbing, then Sakura had already summoned, and I risked giving myself away to her. Fortunately, there was no reaction at all, and I got to see my littler sister as she went about her archery practice, if only for a minute or two.

It killed me a little inside every time I had to look at her and know she was suffering, and I felt it all the more keenly now that the time was finally about to come where I could actually save her. It made it all the harder to turn away from her and leave, but it wasn’t time, not yet. Zouken would get his, I guaranteed it, I just had to finish preparing before I took on the most dangerous man in the city.

Just a little bit longer, Sakura.

The trip back from the school was colder and lonelier without Rin. Aífe’s invisible, intangible presence was a paltry comfort, because although I knew she was there, I couldn’t see her, touch her, hear her, or feel her warmth. I might as well have been truly alone for how much that it felt like I was.

What it said about my life, that the people who knew the most about me were technically a pair of women who were over a thousand years dead.

I had barely stepped through the front door of my new mansion before Aífe shimmered back into existence in front of me, arms crossed over her chest. Somehow, despite being almost sixteen centimeters shorter than me, she seemed to tower.

“Let’s get started,” she said. “I want to see what it is I have to work with when it comes to my newest student.”