Chapter 7: Trust Misplaced

If the ten days I'd spent waiting for anything at all to happen had passed in a swift blur of mundanity, then the next two days were somehow an eternity.

My routine continued mostly unabated. I showed up at the door every morning to walk Rin to school, using the opportunity to check up on Sakura in the Archery Club whenever the urge got too pressing to ignore, spent my day making other, less important preparations (and waiting impatiently for the hours to pass), and stopped back by the school to escort Rin back home.

She protested every time, of course. The words "idiot" and "jerk" must have left her lips more times in the two weeks since I'd come home than it had in the last year and a half, but in spite of what she said, she never seriously tried to stop me from following her to school or picking her up on the way from it. The trouble was, she just couldn't be honest with herself and say she enjoyed having me there.

It was one of the things I loved about her. She wasn't loud and proud about her affections, but if you knew her well enough, then they were incredibly obvious and easy to see. I was one of the rare few people who never had to look at that polite, saccharine falsity of a mask she wore for the rest of the world.

After school, I made my daily pilgrimage to the temple on the mountain, and I always carried an umbrella, even though it had yet to rain. There still wasn't any sign of Medea, and I was starting to get tempted to scour the hotel registries for that fop, Atrum. I had to constantly remind myself that he could easily order Medea to kill me if I actually tried to cut out the middleman, as it were.

January the twentieth began the same as all of those other days, except I was waking up in an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar mansion in a room that lacked all but the barest of my own furnishings. For a scant few seconds, in the haze of that fuzzy line between dream and reality, I thought I was back in London, negotiating the inheritance Dad left for me.

But everything settled shortly, and I pulled myself out of bed with a groan, shutting off my alarm with an impatient smack.

Like I had every morning since my return to Fuyuki, I trudged down the stairs, still feeling half asleep, and made my way to the kitchen to make myself a quick, easy breakfast. Raspberry jam on toast wasn't exactly the healthiest of meals, and it wasn't particularly Japanese a meal either, but sue me, I liked my sweets.

Somehow, I managed to pull myself together enough to make myself presentable and walk down the street in time to meet up with a Rin who was just barely leaving our ancestral home herself. She let out a long-suffering sigh when she saw me, but other than that token protest, she didn't try to stop me accompanying her.

Mitsuzuri wasn't always there to greet us, but when she was, it wasn't uncommon for me to get dragged into their playfighting, or worse, for the two of them to double team me with teasing, often over my supposed "harem" of supple maidens (ugh) who would reportedly drop their panties and bend over if I just said the word (really? Wasn't that going a bit too far?). Somehow, I thought that

was probably Rin's revenge for my insistence on escorting her to and from school, but if I let a little discomfort derail my plans, well, I wouldn't have gotten very far at all.

This morning, she wasn't waiting for us at the front gate, so Rin said her goodbyes and went on to do her own thing while I popped in for a quick moment to check on Sakura. It wasn't like I had expected anything to change in the last week or even the last two days, but I checked on her anyway. To make sure she was still…okay wasn't the right word, not with what she had to put up with, but surviving. Pushing through.

As long as she suffered no more so than usual, I could convince myself to wait and prepare. Matou Zouken's days were numbered. I just wasn't good enough to put him in his well-deserved grave yet.

Somedays, that was the only thing that stopped me from trying.

I couldn't spend all day worrying about my sisters, though. It was all fine to keep an eye on them where and when I could, but there were other things that needed my attention, even if all I could do was impatiently wait for them to become relevant and present instead of concerns for the future.

Like Bazett, who was kind of important to some of my contingency plans for if or when things went off the rails. Keeping track of her was something of a big deal.

When I got back to my temporary home and checked on the cameras in the other mansion, I didn't bother to stop myself from grinning like an absolute loon when I realized the cameras were on because Bazett Fraga McRemitz was in residence and going about her own morning ablutions. And then I actually looked at the feed and made a discovery that I hadn't expected.

"WHOA!"

I slammed my laptop shut and squeezed my eyes closed, my face burning up and my ears on fire. Some part of me waited for the stinging blow of an open hand on my cheek, like the one time I'd walked in on Rin as she was coming out of the shower.

Bazett Fraga McRemitz did not, thankfully for my sanity, sleep in the nude. But "pajamas" for her consisted of "a pair of panties and a t-shirt," something I probably should have considered, since she was Irish as they came. Maybe I'd just gotten too used to Rin and her cotton shirt and pants and her full length nightgown.

On the plus side, at least I had confirmation that Bazett was settling in, perhaps a little too comfortably. Raiga had phoned me to say she was in town yesterday evening, so she must have arrived at the mansion fairly late last night, after I'd gone to sleep.

A sigh gusted out of my mouth and I pinched the bridge of my nose as the heat slowly faded from my cheeks. I sent my laptop a wary, considering glance, but I didn't need to know Bazett's every move, so I left it alone. I'd check in again later on, I decided, after dinner. The next thing I needed to know was when she did her summoning, so I could be there in the aftermath to set up one of my contingencies.

If I was a betting man, I'd have said she was going to spend the rest of the day prepping for the ritual and save doing it for tonight. I knew Rin intended to wait for her 2 AM "peak" before she started, just so that she could be at her absolute best when she tried for her Servant. I didn't know Bazett's, nor even if she was meticulous enough to be that thorough.

Accidental voyeurism aside… This was it. Today was the day. I'd spent ten years preparing myself for what I knew was coming, and now, *now*, it was finally happening for real. This wasn't a nightmare, this wasn't one of my dreams, this was real life, and the Fifth Holy Grail War had finally arrived at my metaphorical doorstep.

It wouldn't be accurate to say I spent the rest of the day on cloud nine, floating through the remaining hours. That would imply I was feeling something more like happiness when a better word might have been eagerness. Impatience. Even excitement had maybe too much of a positive connotation for it, although anxiety probably went too far in the opposite direction.

I didn't have better words for it, whatever it was. I just knew that something I had been waiting for a very long time for had come at last, and I couldn't wait to meet it.

My strange mood didn't go unnoticed. In hindsight, I was sure it must have earned me a few unusual looks both on my way through town and at the school when I went to pick up Rin, but no one commented on it and I didn't notice any strange looks shot my way at the time. Naturally, instead, it was Rin herself who actually spoke her mind and said something about it during dinner.

"You're in an unusually good mood," she said between bites.

I blinked at her from across the table, fork stuck between my lips and the burst of citrus still on my tongue from where I'd bitten into my food. It was my turn to cook tonight, and I'd chosen one of my favorite dishes, a lemon-basted chicken recipe, a kind of Chicken Romano derivative that I'd adapted from an old favorite I had absolutely loved a lifetime ago.

Quite literally, in this case. My, but reincarnation gave that sort of thing a whole new meaning, didn't it?

Chewing gave me a few seconds to think up a response. I *could* have been honest and told her a half-truth, and by the end of it, I probably would have. My relationship with Rin, however, just wasn't that simple, was it?

"Am I not usually in a good mood?" I asked with a mild smile.

She leaned her head on one hand and jabbed the tines of her fork in my direction.

"You were humming while you cooked," she told me flatly. "The last time you did that was when the school let you graduate early."

I hummed.

"Was I? I hadn't noticed."

Rin stared at me, unblinking, and without looking, she speared another piece of her chicken, wound some noodles around it, and shoved the whole bunch into her mouth, chewing slowly and deliberately. After she had swallowed, she closed her eyes briefly, let out a long sigh, and asked, "Alright, who was she?"

Unbidden, my mind supplied an image of the scantily clad Bazett I'd glimpsed earlier. I schooled my face to keep any hint of my thoughts locked away.

"She?"

"The floozy you were with," Rin said, unamused. "Who was it this time?"

I recoiled incredulously. "Floozy?"

"Don't think I don't know," said Rin, pointing at me with her fork again. "Every so often, you'll go off for the day and come back looking like that. I've seen that sort of look enough times on the guys in my class when they get lucky to know what you spend those days doing. So who was she? Please tell me it's just some side dish you're having a fling with and not a professional."

…Oh man, she was walking right into this one, wasn't she?

A long, exaggerated sigh came out of my mouth. "Okay, you've found me out," I said. "I confess, there *is* a special girl I'm seeing."

Rin snorted, pinning me with narrowed eyes and a venomous scowl. "I knew it."

"I can't help myself," I went on, shaking my head. "She's just so beautiful. And feisty, yes, that's the best part. I can't help falling in love with a woman who can kick my ass."

Rin's face twisted into a complicated expression and she pinched the bridge of her nose. "Oh god, please don't tell me you and Ayako have actually been going behind my back and keeping it a secret. She'll never let me live it down."

"Of course not," I said, and Rin let out a sigh of relief. "No, no, this girl is incredibly special. I can't help having to see her as often as I can, and having to be away for six months was absolute torture."

Rin's brow furrowed. "She's a local?"

"Born and raised in Fuyuki," I confirmed, desperately smothering my grin. "The fairest in the city, in fact. She has the most wonderful long, dark hair with just a bit of curl at the ends, not a blemish anywhere on her body, and my absolute favorite feature is her bright, brilliant blue eyes."

The understanding that slowly dawned on her face was almost as delicious as the vibrant red blush that crept across her cheeks, and at last, I broke down and laughed. Rin hid behind her hands, pressing her face into her palms.

"Yukio, you jerk!"

Once I'd managed to get my laughter under control, I asked her, "Is it really that strange for me to be in a good mood?"

She peeked out at me from between her fingers. "Maybe not, but you're definitely in a better mood than usual."

"I got some really good news today," I admitted, shrugging.

"And all the other times?" she probed, slowly coming out from behind her hands.

"Do you think our investments magically flourish?" I retorted wryly. "Maybe that getting myself emancipated at nine years old was as easy as telling a judge to make it so? Those other times, I was

talking to either my financial advisor or my lawyer. You don't think I was making the beast with two backs with them as a twelve-year-old, do you?"

The tips of her ears were so bright a red they almost glowed.

"W-well, I guess maybe that's a little unreasonable," she muttered. "B-but there are some very strange women out there…"

My mouth twitched. "My, but that's a lovely glass house you have. Are you sure you should be throwing stones inside it?"

This time, Rin's brow twitched. "Just what exactly are you insinuating there, Yukio?" she asked with a plastic smile.

"Are you trying to tell me magi are in any way normal?"

She let out a sharp breath through her nostrils.

"No, I guess not," she admitted. "You don't have to be so vulgar about it, though."

I rolled my eyes. "This from the girl who thought I was sleeping around with prostitutes."

Her cheeks burned red again, and rather than spit back whatever retort might have been on her tongue, she retreated and turned back to her dinner, pointedly refusing to look at me. So did I a moment later.

When we were done eating, I stayed only long enough to help clean up (and pack up some leftovers for myself, because even if she enjoyed it for what it was, this was *my* favorite meal, not hers, and she refused to hold onto more than a single extra serving), and once that was handled, I made my way back up the street to the mansion I was housesitting at for the duration of the War. There still wasn't any sign of rain in the sky, and I'd made my daily pilgrimage up to the Temple earlier than usual.

Once I had my leftovers safely tucked away, I sat down in the parlor and pulled out my laptop to check on Bazett. I fully expected to find her in the dining room by herself, finishing off her own meal alone.

I most certainly didn't expect to find her chatting amiably with Kotomine Kirei.

I almost jolted right out of my seat, I panicked so hard, but on a second look, they hadn't made their way down to the basement yet, so I still had time to get there before things went down. Instead, they were…catching up?

It felt incongruous with everything I knew about Kirei. The man was a monster. No matter what, there was no way I could forget the look on my father's face as Kirei murdered him in cold blood, and I'd had my own fair share of nightmares about the orphans wasting away in the basement of his church. He was oily and slimy and even Rin, who had no idea of what he'd done to our family, let alone a bunch of innocent kids, knew better than to turn her back to him. Ever.

And yet, before my eyes, a smiling Bazett was sharing a cup of…either tea or coffee, I couldn't tell which, with the man who was, for me, the Devil in the flesh. She was talking with him like he was an old friend, and Kirei was actually smiling, as well. Smiling and talking with her so casually.

How could she not see the insidiousness behind that smile? How could she not tell that he had something nefarious planned, that he was eyeing her so callously as he plotted his moment of betrayal?

If only she knew better… But even if I'd tried to warn her, what reason did she have to believe a random kid — one connected quite dearly to the Second Owner, who was guaranteed a slot in the Grail War — over the comrade who had fought beside her against some of the worst the Moonlit World had to offer?

None. Worse, it would only make her more suspicious of me, and it might even clue Kirei in, because there was no way she wouldn't bring an accusation like that right to him the instant I made it. There was no point in even making the effort.

I stood up suddenly and shut my laptop, then set about getting ready to leave. My laptop was stuffed into its shoulder bag, and a minute or two later, I was out the door and headed for Shinto. There was no telling how much time I had before they moved to do the summoning for Lancer, and it was going to take me something like two hours to get all the way there.

There was a 24-7 internet cafe two blocks from the edge of the city. In lieu of a better place closer to the ghost house, it would have to do.

I was in such a rush that I almost forgot that I could even call a taxi service, which would have been unfortunate because it wound up shaving at least an hour off of my travel time. He got me far enough to put the internet cafe in walking distance, and I only barely remembered to offer the clerk a quick, polite greeting as I nearly ran to find a seat.

The only reason this place even existed was probably because Shinto was trying to modernize itself as much as possible.

By the time I got settled in and had my laptop opened back up, it was approaching nine o'clock, and the sun had long since set. Kirei and Bazett had apparently spent the entire time still talking, because I'd gotten everything booted back up just in time to watch them set their mugs down and stand up to leave the living room. Bazett went upstairs to grab something, but Kirei made his way directly down to the basement to wait for her.

For just an instant, as he walked in, he looked around and his eyes seemed to find the camera. My heart stopped, waiting for a smirk, a raised eyebrow, any sign at all that he knew I was watching — but his gaze passed over it and he continued his casual inspection, completely oblivious to my surveillance.

Bazett joined him a few minutes later and offered a carefree grin to her friend and comrade. He stepped back out of the way, and she stepped forward, making a few last second adjustments, and showing her back to him without the slightest worry. When everything was to her liking, she took off the pair of earrings she was wearing and set them in pride of place in the formulcraft array.

Her catalyst. They must have had some sort of connection to Cúchulainn if she was that confident they would do the job.

With everything else ready, she threw out her hands and started chanting the incantation. I wished the cameras had audio just then so that I could have an even better idea of what was going on —

although having to listen to her be all chummy with Kirei earlier might have turned my stomach — but they didn't, so I was stuck watching impotently.

The circle started to glow as she kept chanting. She must have been, at least, because the angle of the camera only showed me her back, so I had to assume. Light flooded the room, casting everything in an eerie glow. An unseen wind picked up, tugging at her clothes and hair.

And through it all, Kirei stood behind her, watching stoically, with his hands clasped together at the small of his back.

The light grew brighter and brighter. The wind grew faster. Bazett's stance remained the same as she held out one arm towards the circle, and the light spilled out over her splayed fingers.

I almost missed the moment a stark, red pattern etched itself over the back of her hand.

The light flared, so bright it nearly blinded the camera, and the wind burst, sending everything aflutter. At the center of the storm, a figure in blue with a long, red spear took shape like a shadow cast against the wall.

And at that moment, while everything was in flux and nothing had settled, Kirei struck. With a blow like lightning, one of Black Keys cut through the air — and then through the flesh of Bazett's arm, just above the elbow joint.

I was glad, just then, that I *didn't* have audio, because her startled scream would have jolted me into action, and I would have rushed to her aid too soon, with Kirei and Lancer still there. I would have died.

Instead, having to sit and watch it silently as she fell to the floor and slowly lost consciousness gave me enough of a grip to weather it and wait. I'd known from the beginning that this was going to happen, and I'd known from the beginning that nothing I did would be able to change it. Of all the things my scattered memories of the events to come had covered, this was one of the ones that was set in stone. Predetermined.

Fated.

It only gave me an even deeper appreciation for just how much of a monster Kirei was as he callously picked up Bazett's severed arm and ripped the Command Spells out of her hand without even blinking. I saw Lancer's mouth move as he started to get an inkling of what had happened, saw his face twist with fury, but before he could do anything, Kirei tossed aside Bazett's arm and lifted his own, glowing red with his own Command Spells *and* hers.

The leftovers from the previous Wars. One of the cheats he had access to that would make him a challenge, no matter what. Teaching myself and honing my body to compete with that had always been a part of the goal, and apparently it had always been a fool's dream, because I couldn't even beat Fujimura-sensei.

Kirei's first Command Spell hit Lancer like a physical blow, and grudgingly, he submitted, furious the whole time. Another order must have been given, because a moment later, Lancer vanished into spirit form and disappeared from view. I had to assume he'd been ordered back to the church, because where else would Kirei send him?

And once Lancer was gone, Kirei spared Bazett a single, contemptuous glance, and then left her to bleed out on the basement floor.

Waiting was torture. But no matter how much I hated it, Kirei was an opponent I absolutely had to take seriously, because I absolutely couldn't face him, right now. Instead, I had to sit and wait for him to stroll up the stairs, through the living room, and out the front door. I had to wait for the camera hidden by the doorbell to turn on, watch him walk away, and then turn back off.

But the instant I was sure he was gone, I slammed my laptop shut, shoved it unceremoniously into my bag, and tore out of the internet cafe like the Devil himself was on my heels. I ran for all I was worth, sprinting through the streets and out into the outskirts at the edge of the city, and I didn't stop, not even to catch my breath, until the ghost house came into view.

There was no way of knowing how much time I had. Bazett *would* die without my intervention, that much was obvious, but magi had ways of surviving some incredibly deadly stuff. A magus with an old and powerful enough Magic Crest could hover on death's door for hours before finally succumbing.

The front door almost flew open as my hand landed on the knob. Kirei cared so little that he hadn't even bothered to lock it on his way out. I paid it no mind except for how convenient it was as I raced through the house and towards the basement as quickly as my legs would carry me.

I found her exactly where she'd been left.

Knowing it was going to happen hadn't prepared me for seeing it happen. Seeing it happen through the lens of a camera hadn't prepared me for seeing it with my own eyes. My stomach churned at the sight.

God, there was so much blood.

My bag was all but thrown to the side as I rushed over to her and dropped to my knees next to her. I turned her over as gently as I could, pressing my fingers against her carotid to check for a pulse — it was there, but thready and weak. When I held my palm over her mouth, her breath was hot against my skin. I wasn't too late, then. I could still save her.

I pulled off her tie and looped it just above the stump of her arm, then yanked it tight enough to stem the flow of blood. Then, carefully, I hooked one arm under her knees and one arm under her shoulders, lifted her up, and carried her over to the clearest, cleanest spot I could find. Almost against my will, my eyes found her face, pale and white and splattered with red blood, and I had the stray thought that she really was very pretty, mole beneath her eye and all.

I tried not to think about the legs those fitted pants of hers were hiding and how sexy they were, especially since my fingers were currently curled around one steely thigh. I had much more important things to focus on, like *reattaching her goddamn arm*.

Her skin was cold and clammy as I set her down. She was going into shock.

There wasn't any time to feel gross about it as I went over to grab her severed arm and rolled the sleeve down to show the wound. A sense of surreality permeated the entire situation as I rolled up the sleeve on the part of her arm still attached to her body and went about lining up the wounds so that the muscles, bone, and tendons all matched.

It was almost like I was hovering over my own body, watching myself reconnect the severed tissues with magecraft I had only ever practiced on cadavers, because real, live people — even magi — weren't exactly keen on having their limbs severed "for learning purposes." The closest I'd ever gotten with living tissue was closing a few deep cuts by stitching the edges back together.

I wasn't sure how long I spent patching her back up. Even with her arm back in its proper place, and that was already a not insignificant challenge to get right, there were still other issues I needed to deal with. For one, she lost a lot of blood, and stimulating the production of more blood cells and blood plasma was always a tricky business, because it introduced the risk of clotting. Without knowing her blood type, transfusions would be tricky.

The safer thing would be keeping her in a medical coma for the time being, so that was what I did.

Once she was at least stabilized enough that she wasn't going to give up the ghost at any moment, I got her out of the basement and up the stairs, and only as I was reaching for my phone with one blood-stained hand did I realize another problem I had to deal with. Namely, both she and I were absolutely soaked, and anyone who saw us would have a very good reason to think I was carting around the body of my murder victim.

That was just what I needed: the police slapping me in cuffs and taking me off for interrogation while they rushed her to the hospital. There was no way Kirei wouldn't find out about the whole thing in a matter of hours.

Fortunately, I was well used to the manipulation of blood and other fluids, because of my dual wind and water alignments. Unfortunately, even if I used magecraft to pull the blood out of our clothes, that didn't do anything about the conspicuously missing sleeve on her left arm. Equally as unfortunate, it didn't leave me with much in the way of options.

There was nothing else for it, so I carried her up another set of stairs — let me tell you, a hundred-thirty pounds of dead weight in the shape of a woman wasn't the easiest thing to lift — and into the closest bathroom I could find. I set her down in the tub, and then went about the painstaking process of pulling the blood out of our clothing.

It was actually easier than it sounded, but that didn't make it less of a pain in the ass.

I left her there only long enough to go to her room and find her another set of clothes, and apparently, she came prepared, because there were another three suits identical to her current one packed away in her luggage. Maybe she just really liked fitted suits. Who was I to judge?

Getting her undressed was a bit of a struggle, and in just about any other circumstance, having an attractive, half-naked woman in my arms would have been a thrill. It was undercut by her cool skin, her white pallor, and the inflamed ring that circled the bicep of her left arm. No matter what I did, that would inevitably scar.

"Sorry about this," I muttered to her as I stripped off her old suit.

It was a bit of a shame it was ruined, because it was actually a really nice suit. Not so nice that I would've been afraid to wear it anywhere for fear of the slightest tear or stain, but nice enough that she could have easily been mistaken for the CEO of a major corporation.

Her underwear felt like a step too far, so I left it on and just got her into her new suit, which was twice as hard as getting her out of the old one had been.

Once she was dressed again, I wrapped her up in a blanket from the bedroom and packed away whatever of her necessities I found. Fortunately, she hadn't really settled in yet, so most of her stuff was still in her suitcases and the few things that weren't were either easily put back in or left be (because I wasn't touching her unwashed underwear unless and until it became an unavoidable hazard).

A quick call summoned another taxi, and that was when I discovered it was just past midnight.

As I waited, I took a seat in the armchair opposite the couch I'd laid Bazett on and just let myself unwind a little.

"What a long day," I told the air.

I was ready for it to be over.

Twenty minutes later, the taxi arrived, and my moment of relaxation ended, so I leveraged myself out of my chair.

The taxi driver gave me a strange look when I walked out the front door carrying a woman in a suit, so when I got her situated in the back seat, I offered him a smile and quietly told him, "Jetlagged pretty badly, the poor dear."

A finger held up to my lips in the universal bid for silence sold the whole thing, and he accepted it without comment.

It might not even have been necessary. The Japanese people were very much of the "mind your own business" mindset, so he probably wouldn't have commented on it anyway.

Once I packed her luggage into the back seat with her, I climbed in and gave my new address to the driver. In the dark, so late at night, the traffic was thin, so an extra fifteen minutes or so were cut off our transit time, and he pulled up outside my mansion shortly after one in the morning. I wasn't sure I hadn't dozed off during the trip.

Somehow, Bazett wound up bundled up in a bed in one of the spare bedrooms. She was still pale when I left her, but she wasn't as cold and her lips weren't blue, and most importantly of all, her heart rate had settled into something much less alarming and much healthier. Her luggage wound up dropped on the floor unceremoniously, because I was just *done*.

Half-asleep, I stumbled into my new room and collapsed face first onto my bed, too tired to even bother undressing. It felt like seconds before I was drifting off to a well-deserved rest.

The next morning, dark clouds hung overhead, rumbling with distant thunder, and a biblical torrent of rain poured down the entire day.