

Chapter 6: Interloper

Ten days passed quickly.

Frustratingly, they were all the same, a blur of mundanity where nothing of import happened. The cameras in the Edelfelt mansion remained off, because no one was there to activate them. My daily pilgrimage to the Ryūdō Temple featured no elfin women, feebly struggling to make it up the stairs. No pale-haired, red-eyed fairies appeared to threaten me or anyone else in a sweet voice with a pleasant smile.

It was a boring everyday.

How had it turned out that the wait of ten short days felt longer than ten years?

On January the eighteenth, I woke up just as I had the day before, and the day before that, and the day before that, and just as I had those days, I rolled out of bed, bleary-eyed, trekked down the stairs, put a pot of water on for myself to share with my sister, and made a quick breakfast, with two pieces of sparsely buttered toast set aside for Rin. Like every day for the past week and a half, I ate quickly and quietly and sat down to enjoy my mug of tea while I waited for Rin to wake up herself and drag herself out of bed.

As with every day, at exactly six-thirty on the dot, there was a thump from upstairs, like something heavy had been dropped on the floor — or someone had dropped unenthusiastically out of bed. A few minutes later, a girl in pajamas with her long hair askew stumbled down the steps and into the living room, just as bleary-eyed as I had been and half asleep.

As I had every day prior, I gestured with one hand towards the kitchen, and over the rim of my cup, I told her, “Toast and tea on the counter, ready and waiting.”

She mumbled something that might charitably have been called a thanks and then staggered off in that direction. There was the clatter of her clumsily fixing up her tea to her preference, and then she came back a minute or two later, half hunched over and swaying a little with every step.

If I didn't know her better, I might have been scared she was going to drop her food or her tea and make a mess, but Rin had always been like this, and she hadn't spilled anything yet. She plopped down next to me with an explosive, exhausted sigh and started nibbling at her food and sipping at her tea as she slowly began to wake up.

“Rough night?” I asked her mildly.

“Yes,” she said, and then she lanced me with a sideways glare. “And no, there wasn't a boy involved, so get your head out of the gutter.”

“Oh no, I'm getting predictable,” I lamented with a smile. “Are you sure you didn't sneak someone in for a little funny business? I won't judge, I promise. You're a healthy teenage girl, after all. It's only natural.”

“No, I absolutely didn’t! I was trying to make a few last minute preparations, you ass!” she said. “What part of my life right now makes you think I have the time or the interest to invest in a romantic relationship? Enough to...to fool around, at that!”

I chuckled into my tea. “Methinks the lady doth protest too much.”

She made a disgusted noise in the back of her throat.

“Could you at least use a Japanese idiom for that? You’re not in London anymore, you know!”

My lips quirked to one side. “Are you sure you’re awake? We’ve *been* talking in English.”

She blinked at me, and then her brow furrowed, and at last, a flush spread across her cheeks. She looked away, refusing to meet my eyes, and busied herself with her two meager pieces of toast.

I sighed, set my tea down on the coffee table, and leaned over. “I’m going to start moving out today.”

She blinked again and turned to look at me, toast hanging from between her teeth. “Already?” she asked around her food.

“It’s the eighteenth,” I pointed out. “Might as well get settled in, right? Besides, I thought you’d be glad. Didn’t you want me gone before the War got started?”

“Well, yes, but...” She let out an explosive sigh of her own. “I guess I just...got used to having you around again.”

I smiled. “Oh, so you *do* care.”

Her cheeks flushed a little again, just the slightest.

“Jerk. How many times are you going to make me say it? You’re my twin brother, of course I care.”

As many times as I had to, Rin. I was going to cherish every utterance of your affection for as long as I possibly could, because the possibility was very real that it might not be that much longer at all.

“That doesn’t mean I don’t like hearing it.”

She huffed.

“Yeah? Well, don’t get used to it! You’re not going to be seeing me for most of the next month, after all!”

“Why ever not?” I asked, feigning incredulity. “I’m not moving *that* far away, Rin. It’s just up the street. There’s no reason I can’t walk you to school every day until things kick off for real.”

She looked at me in horror. “You wouldn’t.”

I just smiled at her. She sighed again and dragged a hand over her face.

“You absolutely would. Are you *trying* to ruin the elegant image I’ve spent the last four years crafting?”

“Nope,” I said brightly. “I’m trying to ruin *mine*.”

She stared at me for a moment, uncomprehending, and then she snorted and doubled over, clutching her stomach and laughing. Somehow, she kept her mug of tea from spilling, probably because it was mostly gone.

“Oh my god,” she managed between gasps. “You’re really that desperate to get those girls to leave you alone?”

“If I never have to receive another ‘confession’ letter,” I told her, “then I’ll consider it effort well spent.”

One was more than enough, but as that girl at Homurahara last week had proven, I didn’t have to still be in school to get “confessed” to by one of my old yearmates. It was why I’d also avoided checking up on Sakura more than once or twice since then and left Rin at the front gate, now.

Rin shook her head. “Only you, Yukio. Why, if Shinji were as popular as you were with so little intent on your part, he’d have built a harem by now.”

“Not for lack of trying,” I said dryly, “at least as far as I understand it.”

She cocked one eyebrow and rolled her shoulders in a careless shrug.

“Well, I guess some girls *do* find him charming, when he’s not being sleazy about it.”

Even if I hated his guts for what he was party to, I had to admit that she at least had that much right. Still, I couldn’t leave it alone and let her walk away without slinging a final, parting insult at him.

“He’s the sort of boy who peaks in high school.”

She let out another unladylike snort, then sighed and stood, draining the last of her cup. “Sorry to cut this short, but I should get going.”

I waved her off.

“Go on without me, today. I need to get a headstart on packing all of my stuff up and moving out. But I’m going to be waiting on the curb tomorrow, because you’re not getting rid of me that easily. Got it?”

“Yeah, yeah. Big, strong *Onii-chan* there to protect me from the slaving hoards of horny teenage boys.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said coyly. “I need *you* to protect *me*. All of those girls just want me for my body, and you’re the only one who can fight them off.”

“Not going to claim they’re after your virginity?”

“Alas,” I said melodramatically, one hand pressed to my heart, “I’m afraid that was stolen from me quite some time ago. It’s quite the tragic story, really, and I’m far too traumatized to tell it.”

She snorted, shook her head again, and left, bouncing up the stairs much faster and lighter than she had coming down them. About ten minutes later, she came back down, dressed, her school bag in one hand, and her hair styled. She stepped into the living room long enough to say goodbye.

“I’m heading out,” she announced to me. “I expect you to at least stay for dinner one last time tonight, got it?”

I blinked at her.

“Huh. You did your hair differently, today.”

The parts that she normally styled into her signature twin tails were pulled back and styled into a pair of small braids that were tied together at the back of her head. It actually looked really pretty, gave her more of an office worker look instead of high school girl. Feminine and dignified, rather than girlie.

She blinked back at me, and then her face flushed a bright, brilliant red to match her jacket.

“I-idiot!” she spat. “You’re the one who told me I’d look more mature if I wore my hair like this! Well, not like this, exactly, but it’s a compromise! And what’s with that delayed reaction, anyway! I’ve been wearing my hair like this for almost a year!”

Really? And I hadn’t noticed?

“You have?”

“Ugh!” She spun around and stomped away. “You’re so clueless sometimes, Yukio!”

A minute later, the front door swung open, and still sounding very much angry, Rin called back, “I’m leaving!”

“Go and come safely!” I shouted, more out of reflex than anything else.

The front door shut, a little more firmly than it really needed to, and an exasperated breath hissed out of my nostrils. Good grief. Had I been so distracted by my own preparations for the Grail War that I’d missed something that should have been so incredibly obvious?

“I’ll have to make her something extra special for dinner tonight,” I told the empty air. “Make it up to her.”

Rin had always been pretty, but that more mature look really suited her so incredibly well. The twin tails had been fine for a seven-year-old, cute, even, but as an adult, the hints of sophistication were a much better look.

I didn't know how I hadn't noticed it before. Even as busy as I was trying to get ready, Rin was literally the most important person in my life, so even something as simple as changing her hairstyle should have been like a giant, neon sign glaring at me.

Maybe I should slow down a little, try to relax? Missing something like that might be a sign that I was focusing too much, getting tunnel vision, and that could be just as dangerous in any number of different ways as slacking off and letting the chips fall where they did.

For a few minutes more, I sat alone in the living room, accompanied only by the tick of the mantle clock, and nursed my mug of tea.

When it was all gone, I got up, went to the kitchen, and gave the dishes from both my breakfast and Rin's a quick wash. Ten minutes later, I was upstairs and pulling out my suitcases so I could start packing up everything I would need for the next month.

It was going to be a long one.

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Right around noon, I had started settling into the old Edelfelt mansion down the street. Fortunately, whatever magecraft had kept the other one in good shape had kept this one just as pristine, so there hadn't been any need to go about dusting or otherwise cleaning the place up and it was just a matter of getting used to living someplace new. Since I'd been spending the better part of the last three years making trips back and forth across the British Isles, staying somewhere I hadn't been before was something I happened to be well accustomed to.

The only thing the house really lacked was food, which meant a shopping trip later in the day was going to be essential. It did mean that I had to go back home to make myself lunch, which turned out to be just as well, since I'd forgotten my laptop when I left.

And while I was there, well, there wasn't any reason not to check on the camera feeds from the ghost house in Shinto, was there?

Unfortunately, just like the last week, there was no sign of anyone having moved in. The Association's representative in the Grail War was still missing in action, and the time for her to show up and prepare her entry was fast dwindling away. Not for the first time and definitely not for the last, I cursed the vagueness of the timeline as I knew it, because all I had to go on was "about a week before Saber's summoning."

Reikan hadn't called me, either, which meant Medea hadn't shown up, yet.

It was all hit and miss. The easy things were going according to plan, exactly how I'd imagined they would for the last ten years, but the important bits kept spiralling off. Fujimura-sensei had beaten me so effortlessly, Medea was missing in action, and the Mage's Association's representative in the Holy Grail War was nowhere to be seen.

Was it just a matter of timing, and I was getting too impatient? Everything before January 31st was murky and unclear, after all, full of estimates and maybes. Or was there something else to it? Something I hadn't thought of, a possibility that I hadn't given enough consideration?

For ten years, I'd been moving forward under the assumption that all of the things filling my head were right. Could it be, was it possible...

My laptop was shut down and stowed back away with a frustrated sigh, and I took it back with me to the Edelfelt mansion before I went out for groceries. By the time I was done with all of that, it was starting to get pretty late in the afternoon, so I grabbed my umbrella and made my daily trip up the mountain to the temple.

It still didn't rain. The skies had been threatening for the better part of a week, but the forecast still only listed a "chance" of showers, although the number kept rising every day. Equally so, there was no sign of an elfin waif along the mountain steps, and Reikan only told me that she hadn't shown up, so my trip was equally fruitless as it had been every other day.

It was as I was stepping back into the Edelfelt mansion that something finally happened.

My cellphone rang, and I fished it out of my pocket to find a number I recognized. It took all of my will power not to flip it open as quickly as I could and instead to take my time so that I didn't give the impression of being in a hurry.

"Appearances are everything" wasn't just a line that applied to the Clocktower, after all.

"This is Tohsaka Yukio," I said politely into the receiver.

"Yukio-san," the voice on the other line greeted me. My heart skipped a beat. I had to wet my lips.

"Raiga-san," I said calmly, like my pulse wasn't thundering in my ears. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this call?"

"I'm repaying the favor I owe you from back then."

Yes, yes, yes, yes! Finally, things are starting to go my way!

I made sure to keep my voice even, my tone distant and disinterested. Politics was such a messy business, but it was even messier when you were playing with people as dangerous as the Yakuza. They were not as nerve-wracking as magi could be, but I didn't intend on underestimating them or their resources anytime soon.

Their resources were the exact reason I'd cultivated that favor, way back when.

"Oh? Should I take it to mean you've found her?"

Please say yes, I begged him silently. Please say yes. Please.

"She was exactly as you described her to me — medium height, slender build, auburn hair, business suit. One *Bazett Fraga McRemitz*, according to her passport."

A jolt of adrenaline shot through my stomach.

"You've confirmed it, then? She's in Japan?"

“She arrived at the airport in Tokyo just last night,” Raiga said. “Given the lines from there to here, she should be in Fuyuki in no later than two days.”

Two days. Just two days. That was all the longer I had to wait until things *finally* got started for real.

“I see. Thank you for your diligence. Consider your favor to me repaid, Raiga-san.”

“Not at all. In fact, as a matter of courtesy, I will contact you again when she arrives in Fuyuki.”

I swallowed.

“That isn’t necessary.”

“I insist, Yukio-san. The Fujimura Group doesn’t do things by halves. I will not consider our debt fulfilled until then.”

“Then, I can only accept your dedication and thoroughness, Raiga-san. Please convey my appreciation to your men for their work.”

“I will do so. Good day, Yukio-san.”

“Good day, Raiga-san.”

I waited until I heard the click of his phone turning off and then ended the call on my end, too, and pumped my fist victoriously.

“Yes!” I shouted to the empty mansion. “Yes, yes, yes, yes, *yes!* She’s on her way! Raiga, you old, cantankerous codger, if you were here right now, I could kiss you!”

Bazett had finally shown up. It was still going to be another few days before she made it to Fuyuki, but finally, *finally*, things were moving forward and I wasn’t just twiddling my thumbs while I waited for something to happen. Ten years of planning and preparing, ten years of worry and nightmares, and there was finally something I could act on, something I could *do* about it all.

Something tickled my gut from the inside, and I couldn’t stop the enormous grin from spreading across my face as I giggled quietly to myself. It was hard to contain my excitement, but too many years of pushing everything down beneath a mask of politeness and elegance just so I would be taken seriously was just as hard to shake.

This was proof, now. Proof that all of those things I’d had in my head for the last decade weren’t just the imaginations of a brat who had had a bad fever dream or a reaction I’d had to activating my magic circuits for the first time. It was all real. Medea and Bazett and the Fifth Holy Grail War. Shirou’s Reality Marble. Archer, Herakles, Illyasviel, King Arthur, Cúchulainn.

I took a deep breath, and some of my excitement died.

Medusa, Zouken, Shinji, Sakura, the pit of worms, too. The Shadow. Angra Mainyu and the corrupted Holy Grail. Gilgamesh. Those were all real, too.

Maybe it would have been worth it to be wrong if it meant none of that had ever been true.