

Interlude I: Spiraling Repetition

It was a cruel irony, that she would make it so far, only to fail at the very end.

Her goal was in sight. The temple stood above her, looming, so close and yet impossibly far. If she reached her arm out, if she just extended her fingers far enough, she should be able to... But no. A stairway stood in her way, stretching up and into the distance, an insurmountable obstacle — one she could have easily conquered, had she but the energy.

She did not. It was taking everything she had, every scrap of will and every ounce of focus, just to keep herself from fading away. Already, non-vital functions in her body were beginning to shut down, so that the spiritual core that formed her shell upon this earth, that gave her the foothold to stand in this reality, could preserve its existence for just a few seconds longer.

Her body was already halfway numb, although that may in part have been because of the cold rain. Her heart beat a weak, rapid pulse. Each breath was shallow and sluggish, like trying to suck in air through a straw. Even the muscles in her arms and legs, normally orders of magnitude stronger than a human's, had trouble supporting her weight.

She was going to fade away, before accomplishing anything, before she even had a chance to try and win the prize promised at the end of this war. She was going to be defeated, not by an enemy Servant or by the strategic ploys of an enemy Master, but by a simple lack of the magical energy necessary to maintain her body. All without having even had the chance to fight.

It seemed, in spite of everything, her wretched Master had had the last revenge, after all.

It wasn't funny, but she wanted to laugh, and she almost startled herself as she realized that she already was.

A cruel, cruel irony, indeed.

“In the end, this is how I die again, is it?” she wheezed.

She wasn't sure if the streaks of water running from her eyes and down the sides of her face were tears or just the rain.

“Bandied about for others' use, exploited, then cast aside and reviled as a traitor...”

She lifted her hands towards the bleak sky, as though to ask the uncaring gods to come to her aid.

But they would not have, even if they still existed in this era. Of course not. It was their fault she had been besotted with that wretch in the first place, after all. She had never had their favor.

“Was it too much to ask... just once, for me to...”

To have her own wish granted, instead of being a tool for others' wishes?

“Ara...”

She blinked, turned weakly to try and focus her bleary gaze upon the figure who stood on the path next to her. He — and it was a man, she realized belatedly — stepped towards her and crouched down beside her.

“Well, there you are. I was beginning to wonder if that fool had managed not to screw himself over.”

Through the haze of exhaustion, she caught the impression of a smile, and then, she was being lifted up and into his arms. She caught sight of the temple, again, as he turned away from it — away from the very place she’d been trying so hard to reach.

“No...” she mumbled, but he seemed not to hear.

“Let’s get you out of this rain, shall we? And hope that Lancer’s not still chasing you...”

Then, he carried her off and back into town. The temple faded away into the distance, and at last, disappeared behind the trees as he turned and started down a different path.

She slipped in and out of awareness during the journey. She didn’t know the city well enough to say where he was taking her, and she was barely cognizant enough to see and recognize shapes amongst the rainy gloom as it was, but at some point, he stopped, mumbled something, and then something hot and wet was trickling past her lips and down her throat. She wasn’t sure she didn’t imagine it to begin with.

She came to again some time later — she wasn’t sure exactly how long — to find herself sat in a plush armchair, positioned a little awkwardly. She rearranged herself almost reflexively, surprised a moment later to realize that she’d regained some strength, and belatedly noticed the aftertaste of something salty and metallic upon her tongue.

Licking her lips, she tasted it again at the corner of her mouth.

Blood...?

“Feeling better?”

Her head jerked up, and there, sitting across from her in another armchair was a boy, maybe seventeen, with brown hair and bright blue eyes. Not entirely unattractive, with a slight, careless smile at the corners of his lips. Almost immediately, she noted the traces of red on one finger as he sipped at a cup of what smelled like tea.

“Yes,” she muttered, and was not quite shocked that it was actually true.

She *did* feel better. More solid, more real. Less like she was going to run out of energy in moments and fade away.

It was still a pittance, compared to her normally vast reserves, but she had enough, now, to keep herself stable.

He'd given her magical energy, it was easy to realize. Through his blood. A terribly inefficient method, compared to some of the other ways, but undoubtedly the quickest and easiest, and also the least invasive.

"You saved me."

It came out almost like an accusation. No, it *was*. Because even though she'd been out of it, barely hanging on, she remembered what he'd said when he'd found her. That he'd been *expecting* to find her. That he'd hoped Lancer wasn't still chasing her down.

This was not some random bystander who had found her and rescued her, this was someone who had been *looking* for her and saved her for a *purpose*.

"I suppose I did."

"*Why?*"

Why her? What did he want her for, that he'd come to find her?

He smiled wryly. "Well, for a lot of reasons, I suppose. Part of it was that I found your story just too sad."

The answer threw her for a loop.

"What?"

"Who wouldn't?" he asked. "The fair and beautiful Princess of Colchis, forced by the uncaring gods to love a man she'd never met, then spirited about amongst the company of strangers, forced to commit horrible deeds, used, exploited, and finally, cast away like a used up tissue. It's a tragic story, really."

"You must be reading the wrong legends," she said bitterly. "I'm the *villain* of that story. The woman who killed her own brother, chopped up his body, deceived King Pelias, and jealously slaughtered the king of Corinth and his entire family. A *witch*."

The smile left his face, twisting into a frown, and he set aside his tea to lean forward and look straight at her.

"Take off your hood."

Medea blinked.

"What?"

"I'm going to prove a point," he said bluntly. "Take off your hood."

She hesitated, but after a moment, lifted her hands and pushed back the cowl of her cloak until it rested about her shoulders. She felt strangely exposed without it on.

The boy stood from his chair and crossed the distance, stepping close to her, and unconsciously, as he brought his hand towards her, she tried to lean back and away, but she was weak and the only place for her to go was deeper into her chair. He took hold of her chin, and she flinched.

But his touch, though firm, was surprisingly gentle. He guided her head from side to side, turning her as though to inspect every part of her face, until he turned her back to the front. His gaze was intense and unblinking, and as his lips pursed and his brow furrowed, she realized suddenly what he was going to do and began to gather the meagre magical energy at her disposal.

If he tried to force himself on her, then even if it meant disappearing, she would —

“This is not the face of a witch.”

— flush and stare, uncomprehending.

“What?”

“This is the face of a woman,” he went on, “beautiful, but tired. Quietly defiant, but defeated and downtrodden. This is the face of a woman who has been told what and who she is so many times and so vehemently that she believes it herself, now. The world has called her so many vile names and blamed her for so many evil deeds that she grew too tired of trying to fight it and decided that there was no point in being anything but what they said she was. Even if, underneath it all, she hates it with everything she is.”

Medea tried to look away, a complicated mess of feelings swirling in her gut. Anger, at the boy in front of her for stepping so carelessly into her heart. Indignation, that he would claim to know her thoughts and her feelings. A strange melancholy, because she was absolutely certain that she wasn't the person he was talking about. And threading through it all was a kind of longing, that she wished she could believe she was anything like that.

She wasn't. She hated the term, but she was a witch, and she'd long since decided that that was all she'd ever be.

This naïve boy wasn't going to change that.

But he wouldn't let her turn away, and his grip shifted as he set his fingers under her chin and lifted her face.

“Look at me.” Almost against her will, her eyes turned towards his. “The world doesn't get to decide who you are. Only you can do that. You don't have to be anyone or do anything you don't want to. All you have to do is choose to be true to yourself.”

“Your naïveté will get you killed,” she said coldly. She hoped he didn't notice the faint tremor in her voice.

He smiled and stepped away to sit back in his chair.

“Well, *something* will probably get me killed before this Holy Grail War is over, but I don't think it'll be showing you kindness.”

She laughed, suddenly, high and cruel. He'd almost had her fooled.

But in the end, he was just like everyone else. Another person trying to use her.

“Is that what you call this?” She gestured with one hand down at her own body. “You take me away from the place where I would be strongest, profess to believe in my own goodness, despite my legend, but only supply me a pittance of magical energy? Just enough so that I almost *have* to accept you as my Master? This is your *kindness*?”

He frowned, leaning back in his chair.

“That has *nothing* to do with your identity. The reason I gave you so little magical energy is because you are a Servant with a wish for the Holy Grail. I can list on one hand the number of Heroic Spirits I would trust enough to supply them with more substantial amounts of mana, were they in the same situation, and even *King Arthur* doesn't make it.”

His statement was as shocking as it was ludicrous. It was true that there were Servants a Master absolutely should not trust — many would likely agree that Medea herself belonged on that list — and one might argue that any Caster who was a better magus than its Master was among them. Any Servant whose legend included betrayal or treachery, doubly so.

But *King Arthur*? The beacon of justice, righteousness, and steadfastness during the Dark Ages of Britain's bleakest hours? *Untrustworthy*?

“What?”

He didn't answer. Instead, he let out a sigh and folded his hands in front of his face.

“Alright,” he said. “We were going to run into this eventually, so I suppose now's as good a time as any to talk about it. Medea of Colchis, Servant of the Caster class for the Fifth Holy Grail War: from here, there are two options available to you, each with their own benefits and disadvantages.”

He held out one hand.

“Firstly, you and I forge a contract here and become partners in this War. As part of such a pact, you must forsake the Holy Grail, and in exchange, I will present to you the opportunity to do as I said you can: to make yourself more than your legend. To cast off the shackles that bind you to the role of villain and become a *hero*. To put it simply, self-actualization.”

He was a fool if he believed she'd actually take that offer. Such a paltry reward it was, she thought. Good feelings and happy thoughts. The kind of things a naïve, unabashed idealist might want. It was nothing tangible, nothing that she could really enjoy for more than a few minutes. It was nothing she could touch or hold onto, nothing solid or corporeal or truly valuable. A fool's reward.

When she'd been younger, maybe... But that ship had sailed long ago, with Jason at its helm. The woman she'd become had no want or need for something so useless.

“And if I refuse?” she asked.

“Then option two: I will provide you with enough magical energy to sustain yourself for another few hours and personally escort you to the temple, as you’d planned.”

She laughed. A fool, indeed. “There’s no comparison! Only one of those will afford me the path to achieving my wish; surely you must understand —”

“But if you take option two,” he cut in, “you will certainly fail and die before the War ends.”

Her voice caught in her throat.

“What?”

She must have heard him wrong. There was no way that he’d actually said...

“If you go to the temple, you’ll be killed,” he repeated. “One way or another.”

“...How?”

How could he possibly know that, that he would say it with such certainty? How could he be so sure of it, that there didn’t seem to be any trace of deception in his words, in his tone, in his body language?

He smiled a mischievous little smile.

Of course, she thought, suddenly angry. There was the trap. He wouldn’t tell her. The only way to find out would be to take the first option, to ally with him, or else take her chances that he was wrong.

Could she afford to? He looked unassuming and ordinary, but if he had some sort of clairvoyance ability, then she was already trapped. And he’d done it in such a way... Only enough energy to sustain herself. If she tried to hypnotize him, get his secrets out of him that way, she’d drain herself dry in the efforts, and then it would be a moot point.

Damn him...!

He frowned, tilting his head to the side, and then sighed again.

“Okay, I guess I can give you this much. A freebie, no strings attached.”

He crossed his legs, reached for his cup, then took another sip of his tea.

“Herakles, Gilgamesh, and one of the original founders of the Fuyuki Grail will take part in this War,” he said. “Any scenario where you go to the temple will inevitably pit you against one of those three. In that case, *Herakles* is the only encounter you would have any real chance of surviving.”

Her mouth flapped open.

“Wh-what?” she asked weakly.

To hear that the *greatest hero of Greece* would be the only of those three opponents she might survive...

What kind of enemy made *Herakles* the least likely to kill her?

“And if by some miracle you make it to the end, braving the overwhelming, impossible odds to stand before the Grail and make your wish...” He closed his eyes a moment, let out a long breath, and when he opened them again, he pinned her with a cold, dead stare, blue eyes like chips of ice. “Then no matter how much it hurts me, in order to save the world, I’d kill you myself.”

She blanched.

“Y-you... After you came and saved me, you’d still —”

“Yes. No matter how much I like you, Medea, no matter how much I sympathize with you... Any Servant who would covet the Grail at the expense of all else is my enemy. Even if that Servant is King Arthur. Even if that Servant is *you*.”

He set his cup down. By now, all traces of steam had gone.

“I’m sure you’ve realized it by now, but there are secrets I have about this War and its circumstances. Competitors. The Servants and Masters at play. The stakes. Indeed, the nature of the Grail itself, even. But I’m sure you’ve also realized that I won’t tell you these things if you’re going to be my enemy. So, you must choose.”

He held out one hand. “Forsake the Grail, become my ally, and help me save the world. All the relevant information will become yours, as well. To the best I am able, I can promise you will see the end of this War, or at least not die as miserably as you otherwise would.”

He held out the other hand. “Or, go to the temple, become my enemy, and face all of these challenges alone. Hope that you will overcome all that is thrown at you, and I will be your last opponent.”

“That’s no choice at all!” she said. “Either way, you’re telling me that I won’t get my wish!”

He smiled sadly. “I suppose it does boil down to that, doesn’t it? With one, at least, you will understand *why*.”

As if *that* was any comfort. Forsake her wish, and understand why it was she had to give it up, or try and chase it, only to face an almost certainty that she would never reach it. Both options had the same, inevitable outcome, no matter what.

...No. No, that wasn’t quite true, was it? She’d been thinking of this too much in *his* terms, that she would absolutely follow the paths he provided. There was nothing to say so, no binding oath that would demand she keep to her word, either way. There was nothing to ensure her sincerity, were she to agree.

“Forsake the Grail,” he said. Except she didn’t really have to, did she? There was nothing stopping her — nothing at all — from following him to the end and snatching the prize at the last second.

There was no reason at all she couldn't just pretend to go along with him, say she'd given up on it, and then take the Grail when everyone else was defeated and she and him were the last ones standing.

Even if he used a Command Spell, she had Rule Breaker, so as a very last resort —

“You don't have to make up your mind right this moment,” he said suddenly, cutting off her train of thought.

She blinked. “What?”

“You don't have to make a choice about what you're going to do right this very moment,” he went on. “After all, you're not the only Servant I planned on recruiting.”

What?

“What?” she echoed.

That was absurd. Even a competent Master could only handle sustaining a single Servant at a time, and yet he was talking about supporting *more*? No, it was utterly ridiculous. The amount of magical energy required would be at least five times that of a magus of this era, and even then, it would still be a debilitating strain.

But he didn't seem worried. Instead, he reached down beside his chair and produced a vacuum sealed bag, inside of which was a long, sharp shard of wood that looked like it had come from the spoke of a chariot wheel.

“To the best of my knowledge, so far, Caster, Lancer, and Berserker have already been summoned. There's almost two weeks, yet, before Archer and Saber are called, and maybe a week at the very best before Rider. Assassin... I'm not actually sure if or when that particular Servant will show up.”

He wagged the piece of wood a little. “That means, until I contract with you, I still have a free slot I can use to co-opt one of the others. Considering who I hope to get with this, probably Rider.”

“You intend...to summon another Servant and contract two at once?” she asked slowly.

He was mad, she decided. No, it couldn't be clairvoyance, or if it was, it had obviously driven him insane, like the oracles of old. Not only did he plan on trying to support two Servants at a time, he was also going to give her the perfect means to acquire another Servant to command at the end, when she would abandon him for the Grail.

Knowing her legend, he was going to trust her that far? A fool. A mad, naive fool.

“I said I wanted you to help me save the world,” he replied, grinning. “I never said I wanted you to be the one doing all the fighting. Come now, Medea, most of the other Servants will have either high level Magic Resistance or some other method of resisting your spells. Why would I send you against enemies you can't even hurt?”