

### Chapter 3: Touching Base

There was nothing quite like a hardened wooden pole rushing towards your face.

*Thwack*

It wasn't the same as facing down a real sword, with naked steel and a sharpened blade.

*Thwack-thwack*

There wasn't quite the same sense of danger, of your life and your body being at risk. One wrong move wouldn't see you maimed or dead.

*Thwack*

But it wasn't so safe that you could afford to take hits without concern. Especially when you weren't wearing official kendo safety gear, the kind worn on the regional, national, and professional circuit.

*Thwack-thwack-thwack*

How had I heard it put before... "Death can come even from a wooden sword." One wrong hit to the head, one indelicate blow to the ribs, and you could die just as easily as if you'd been stabbed with a real katana.

*Thwack*

Even so...

*And... parry!*

**THWACK**

There was something much less tense and much more carefree about sparring with a bokken or shinai than a life or death battle with live steel.

The shinai clattered as it hit the ground, rolling over the wooden planks of the dojo until it came to a halt. The owner blinked down at his empty hands, surprised, and I relaxed, resting my own shinai against my shoulder.

"That'll be my win, Emiya," I said matter-of-factly.

Emiya Shirou's face screwed up into something like frustration, and then it smoothed out and he ran a hand through his sweaty hair.

"Yeah," he agreed with a sigh. "You beat me again, Tohsaka."

"No!" Fujimura Taiga wailed from the sidelines. "Shirou! How could you lose, again? You make your beloved Fuji-nee look bad! How can I defend my title if my star pupil loses so easily?"

“I just can’t get a read on you,” Shirou admitted, ignoring her. “Every time we spar, you’re further and further ahead of me.”

“It’s because you don’t practice,” I told him. “You would probably surpass me easily, if you actually dedicated yourself to the art of it.”

That, and I rotated out my shinai so that I never used the same one twice in a row. Those completely unfair eyes of his that recorded the experience of any weapon he saw were useless against a weapon that had no experience attached to it.

It probably helped that I was using a self-made style developed from Irish Bataireacht. The nimbler, almost breezy kind of motions were quite different from the grounded rigidity of traditional kendo forms.

“Yeah, I guess so. It feels like I’ve heard that before.”

I hummed.

That was because I’d told him so, before. He’d probably heard some version of it from Fujimura-sensei, as well, although I was fairly sure she was still on his case about quitting the Archery Club.

Knowing her, Mitsuzuri at least never let him go a day without pestering him to return. There was something to be said about persistent girls, I supposed.

“You’d have more time to focus on it if you just learned to say no, you know. Helping people isn’t wrong, but not every problem is one you yourself need to fix personally.”

He laughed.

“Yeah, it feels like I’ve heard that before, too.”

Because I’d told him *that* before, as well. If I hadn’t known him better, I might have thought my admonishments and advice were simply being ignored, but understanding Emiya Shirou came down to realizing that helping people was basically a compulsion for him. No matter what I said, he would never be able to stop.

Trying to curtail some of that into more reasonable habits had been an exercise in futility from the very start, hadn’t it?

“Shirou!” Fujimura-sensei howled like she was some kind of wounded beast.

I grimaced and turned to her, plastering a fake smile on my face.

“If you want to defend your honor as a kendo champion, Fujimura-sensei,” I said with Rin’s exaggerated politeness, “then you’re certainly free to take his place for the next round.”

She stopped her exaggerated crying instantly.

“Oh...?”

Shirou froze, eyes wide and mouth dropped open.

“Oh no,” he whispered.

“Oh-hohoho!” Fujimura-sensei stood, pointing a finger at me dramatically, like something out of a manga. “Naturally, I accept!”

*What even is my life?*

How was this woman even a real person? She made me exhausted just watching her, and I was easily ten years her junior. That sort of stamina and outgoingness was just ridiculous.

Still. Emiya Shirou was a rank amateur, no matter how hard I'd been trying to drill swordsmanship lessons into his head. As a matter of comparison, defeating him in a spar with nothing on the line wasn't something I could take pride in. If there was someone here in Fuyuki to safely use as my measuring stick, Fujimura Taiga, a master of kendo who only lost in the nationals as a result of a cosmetic violation in her shinai, was the best choice.

“Here we go...” Shirou sighed.

Fujimura-sensei switched places with him, and as though she'd been waiting for it the entire time, she pulled out her special shinai, complete with the tiger-striped charm dangling from the hilt. Smiling, full of confidence, she took her stance opposite of me, a thing of perfection without flaw. It wouldn't be inaccurate to say her form was the epitome of Japanese kendo. It was simply that good.

The epitome of Japanese kendo... But my goal was something far beyond that. I couldn't win unless I surpassed the peak of human martial arts and reached a level to compete with the legends of old.

I let out a breath and stilled my racing heart. My mind honed itself into an edge. My line of sight narrowed to encompass only my opponent and the space that separated us. The rest of the world became unimportant. There was only me and my foe.

My grip on my shinai tightened. The stance I took was low with a center of gravity closer to my ankles than my hips. It resembled a Japanese kendo stance not at all.

Then...

First step, surpass the speed of sound.

Second step, erase the distance that stood between me and my foe.

Third step, unleash an attack that could shatter the enemy's sword in a single blow.

This, the power of the martial arts of the ancient Celts, unseen for nearly two millennia. The Vantage of Swiftness that carried me forward, the Swordbreaker that destroyed the opponent's weapon. *With this, I claim victory!*

Swifter than lightning, I struck —

*THWACK*

— and blinked up at the ceiling.

*THUMP*

“Ah?”

I was on my back?

“Tohsaka?”

When had I fallen down? I had just been racing towards Fujimura-sensei, hadn't I?

Slowly, gingerly, I sat up, prodding gently at my throbbing ribs. There was no stopping my wince, but thankfully, I wasn't seriously injured. A bruise, one easily healed when I got home and there was no one watching, but no outright breaks or apparent fractures, so nothing I needed to worry about right now.

More importantly...

I sighed. The bruise on my chest throbbed. “Again, huh?”

“Oh yeah!” Fujimura-sensei crowed, more to herself than anything. She made exaggerated flexing motions, like some kind of bodybuilder showing off her hard work and bulging biceps. “Fuji-nee's still got it! The reigning queen keeps her crown!”

Shirou gave me a sympathetic smile. “Again.”

Damn it. Fujimura Taiga was a prodigy of kendo, but even she had nothing on the likes of a Servant. If I couldn't even beat *her*, what chance would I have against my true enemy? Taking on such a monster with skills and performance that couldn't even best an ordinary human kendo master...

Double damn it. Ten years of preparation, and this was all the farther I managed to make it? Did all of that work amount to nothing? Was the bridge between me and my goal so insurmountable that it had never been anything but a dream from the beginning?

To have lost to Fujimura Taiga again certainly seemed to say so. Her speed, strength, and skill still put her ahead of me, and the gap hadn't closed, yet. Ten years of training hadn't been enough to overcome the benchmark for my progress.

There was, at least, one area where I held the advantage, though.

“Fujimura-sensei,” I said sweetly, taking my revenge, “it's unbecoming of a teacher to lord her victory over one of her students.”

“Guh!”

Fujimura-sensei stumbled, clutching her belly as though I'd punched her in the gut. A look of agonized shock marred her face.

“Furthermore, it’s absolutely unbecoming of a woman your age to act so childishly. As an adult, there’s a certain example you need to set to those younger than you.”

“Urk!”

She collapsed to her knees, shoulders hunched and head hung as Torashinai clattered to the floor. That easily, I did with just a few words what I’d been unable to do physically and disarmed her of her weapon. In a breathless, strained voice, she wheezed, “An adult... my age...younger...than me...”

Then, the Tiger arose, roaring. “So what if I’m almost thirty?! What counts is that I’m young at heart, you know!”

*That’s exactly the sort of thing someone ashamed of their age would say, Fujimura-sensei.*

Shirou chuckled awkwardly. “That’s Fuji-nee, alright...”

Good grief. The woman who had so easily defeated me after ten years of hard work refining my style couldn’t even be a cold, calculating badass, she had to be a ditz who behaved closer to three than to thirty. There was something just monumentally unfair about that.

“Anyway,” I breathed out. “Say, Fujimura-sensei, do you think I could borrow Emiya for a few hours? There’s a few things I need to discuss with him.”

“Oh?” Her face twisted into a cruel expression only older sisters knew how to make. “Is it time for some boys’ talk, Tohsaka-kun? Or maybe there’s a confession that’s about to happen before my eyes? Ah, Shirou, if that was the way things were, you only had to say so, you know!” She nodded sagely. “Fuji-nee is nothing if not supportive!”

The way this woman’s mind worked...

But her simplicity and earnest nature was also what made her so easy to manipulate.

“Fuji-nee,” Shirou began tiredly.

“Actually,” I said cheerily, “you’re not that far off! Well, if you’re up for hearing all of the gritty details, then feel free to stay and listen.” I turned back to Shirou. “So, Emiya, let’s pick up from our previous lesson. I said last time that there are particular areas of sensitivity that will respond to the proper stimulation, but there’s one in particular that should drive your partner absolutely wild.”

One hand held up, palm towards the ceiling, I made a curling motion with my ring and middle fingers. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Fujimura-sensei’s mouth fall open and her face slowly turn a bright shade of red as she realized exactly what I was teaching.

The real key was to have no shame. After all, for all her exuberance, Fujimura-sensei was a proper Japanese woman when it came to her morals and norms, with all of the trappings that entailed.

“Remember, the key is consistency and repetition. You’ll want to start slow and gradually pick up speed.”

“WH-WH-WHAT ARE YOU TEACHING MY POOR, IMPRESSIONABLE SHIROU?!” she wailed.

*Gotcha.*

“The...what’s the expression...pillow techniques necessary for a man,” I replied guilelessly. “Neither of us has a father to pass on these skills, so I’m only fulfilling my responsibility as his more experienced senior to ensure that Emiya is well prepared.”

“M-m-m-more experienced?” she stuttered. “No! Tohsaka-kun has already known a woman’s touch! Where did I go wrong? I thought I raised you better than that!”

*Implying you had much of anything to do with my growth at all.*

But for all that she frustrated me sometimes, Fujimura-sensei was a decent person and, I liked to think, a friend. There was no point in tearing her down by saying something so hurtful.

An exaggerated, put upon sigh hissed out of my mouth. “Regardless of your opinions, Fujimura-sensei, these are necessary life skills that Emiya will need in the future, and I’m the only one both available and knowledgeable enough to pass them on. Unless you’d like to take over his instruction? Perhaps a woman’s experience in this area is more valuable.”

Her mouth snapped shut, and she went, if possible, even redder. Then, she threw herself onto the floor, clutching at her head, and started rolling around.

“I-I-I couldn’t possibly! Oh, what kind of woman do you take me for! W-with me, Shirou would never...! And besides that, it’s not proper! I’m his guardian, after all! It’s just not my place to...!”

On and on she went, rambling wildly about why it was a bad idea and wouldn’t work and Shirou wouldn’t accept it, besides. He and I watched her go, and some of the things that came out of her mouth made me wonder... But those were the sorts of thoughts I absolutely shouldn’t entertain, so I tried not to think about it.

Finally, after a minute or two of this, she stopped rolling and stopped talking and went still. Then, she stood abruptly.

“Sh-Shirou!” she announced, voice a little squeaky. “In this particular area, your beloved Fuji-nee will entrust your instruction to Tohsaka-kun!” A little quieter, she added, “His experience will serve you well.” Then, at full volume and with max cheer, “See you tomorrow!”

And just like that, she raced out of the dojo and left. When she was gone, I let out a sigh.

“Well,” I remarked. “That was a thing.”

But when I turned back to him, Shirou was bright red, too, with a miserable expression on his face. He refused to meet my eyes.

“What?”

He sighed and rubbed at the back of his neck. “Did you have to use something like... *that* to get her to leave?”

One of my eyebrows rose.

“Would you have preferred she thought *we* were doing the horizontal tango together?”

“The horizontal... N-no, of course not!”

I rolled my eyes. “Then the how of it isn’t all that important, is it? The alternative was letting her in on the secret of magecraft, and we both know that she’d stick her nose in far too deep if we did that. Besides, next time, she’ll leave us alone without the trouble, because she’ll think I’m teaching you... ‘pillow techniques.’”

He didn’t look entirely convinced, so I waved it off. There really wasn’t a point in arguing about it.

“Anyway,” I said, “let’s check up on your progress, now. To your workshop, as it were?”

“To the shed,” he agreed. He honestly looked relieved to have moved on from the subject and to something more in his comfort zone.

It wasn’t like what I’d said was a lie, I thought as he led me out of the dojo and through the halls of his Japanese mansion. A certain blonde-haired girl king would definitely appreciate the pillow techniques I’d just mentioned, when the opportunity arose for him to employ them on her. More than Shirou would appreciate her own knowledge of how to please a man, I’d wager.

Needless to say, the Rin route wasn’t happening, if I had anything to say about it. It was my prerogative as an older brother to jealously safeguard my beloved sister’s heart, and I fully intended to continue doing so.

The Sakura route would mean something had gone horribly wrong. Horribly, horribly wrong.

But, if everything went as planned, then the Grail War would go off without a hitch, all of the big threats would be handled, the world would be saved, and neither Shirou nor my sister would have any idea that I’d had anything to do with it. Neat, clean, tie it all off with a little bow, call it a day, everyone could move on with their lives.

That said, I wasn’t above stacking the deck, just in case things went wrong. That whole thing with Fujimura-sensei itself proved that I couldn’t count on all of my plans going exactly the way I wanted them to — and hadn’t I learned that lesson so many times over the past ten years?

Shirou and I stepped into a pair of shoes and walked through the courtyard to the shed; he drew the door open, and I followed him inside to the sight of half a dozen incomplete projects and experiments, refinements on his skills rather than testing new ideas or exploring different avenues of his craft. The best off were the ones that at least somewhat resembled a sword.

“Okay,” I said, “let’s see how you’ve progressed. Projection first?”

He nodded, then took a deep breath and closed his eyes. The snap between his circuits being off and turning them on was a visible moment, a tightening of his brow as his mental trigger was activated.

“Trace on.”

He held out his hands, and over several long seconds, the frame of a katana slowly took form, sleek, sharp, and with the wrap on the handle fraying from age. The blade slowly filled in, shimmering and shiny, with the burnished bronze *habaki* and the wavy *hamon*, tapering into the curved *boshi* and the pointed *kissaki*. At the base was the *tsuba*, rounded and thin, barely large enough to cover the shape of a fist. When it was finished, he let out a breath, opened his eyes, and offered it to me for inspection.

I took it and gave it a look over with just my eyes — at first glance, there weren’t any flaws. No holes in the structure, so to speak, where the image used broke down and the inherent weakness compromised the resultant construct.

Then again, this was Emiya Shirou. His projection magecraft had always been top notch, compared to standard practices.

“So far, so good,” I said, and Shirou’s lips twitched a little.

I took a deep breath and in my head, I imagined my own mental trigger, the crack of a mirror shattering into countless irrecoverable pieces. It thundered through me as my circuits whirred and spun up and turned on.

“Tosaigid eclaimm.” *Begin analysis.*

The structure of the sword in my hands bloomed in my mind’s eye, and immediately, I set about examining it for flaws, for areas where the image was incomplete or the material was lacking. Any sign at all that this wasn’t the exact sword it looked like, so expertly recreated that it was virtually indistinguishable from the original.

I found none.

Of course, I was also somewhat more limited in my examination than Shirou was. I could only look for obvious malformations; my form of Structural Analysis was not advanced enough to find any mistakes in accumulated history or the manufacturing process, not the way his could. I was only able to determine that the object was “complete” insofar as it was as physically perfect as possible.

Sometimes, I was envious of Shirou’s magecraft. The degree to which he was able to reproduce such fine detail in an object, even if it was limited to “bladed weapons,” was... Well, there was undoubtedly a combination of magecraft that would allow me to do exactly what he did, down to recording the skill and strength with which the weapon had been wielded, and then projecting that “image” into reality.

The difference was, it would take me years of study and probably generations of accumulated skill. Shirou did it as a matter of course.



I smiled, refusing to let any of my thoughts show on my face. “Remarkable as always, Shirou. I can’t find anything at all wrong with this katana.”

I’d done my best to help Shirou. To nurture his talent. Five years of — admittedly sporadic — training was nothing to sneeze at, especially when it let me undo some of Emiya Kiritsugu’s sabotage. He’d made leaps and bounds in the quality of his projection magecraft in that time, to the point that he was faithfully reproducing even these antique pieces with the mystery they’d gathered over the ages intact.

But there was only so much I could do. My own teachings weren’t stellar to begin with, and the one field where I truly excelled was one he was completely incompatible with. Too, Shirou was safe only so long as Kotomine, Zouken, and Rin never realized exactly who he was, who had adopted him, and the fact that he was a magus. Spellcaster, if you wanted to be pedantic about it. The instant he was found out... Well, one of them would give me an earful for keeping it secret, one of them would start planning how to drag him into the Grail War in a way I couldn’t plan for, and the last would kick off my worst case scenario.

And there was the biggest problem: because of who he was, I couldn’t even begin to imagine exactly how spectacularly bad an idea it would be to take him to London and the Mage’s Association, where he would be able to start recording the truly powerful artifacts squirreled away in their vaults — and where everyone who heard his name would probably start making plans to assassinate him while he was still young and inexperienced and hadn’t survived a Grail War.

Thus, the inevitable result before me: a perfect replica of a priceless antique that took him far too long to make and was therefore practically worthless in an actual fight.

At the end of the day, there was just too hard a limit to what I could teach him and how much help I could give him. Without the pressure of a Grail War to accelerate his growth and fill out his arsenal with truly incredible armaments, it seemed this was as far as my own skill could take him.

“Okay, then.” I flipped the sword up, caught it by the back of the blade with my index finger, and let it balance itself there, wobbling a little as it found equilibrium. An excellent blade, simply not my preferred style.

I spun it around until it was pointed, hilt first, at my “student.” He rolled his eyes and dismissed it; it dissolved into motes of golden light that flickered out like fireflies.

“Let’s take a look at your Reinforcement next, shall we?”