

Chapter 4: Surrounded by Smiles

January 8th dawned bright and cold and clear.

There'd been a light dusting of snow over the weekend, but it hadn't stayed on the ground long enough to settle, so classes were set to resume right on schedule. Naturally, since I raced through high school as quickly as I'd possibly been able, I had no real reason to be up so early in the morning, because I'd finally gotten over my jetlag and started sleeping normal hours. I could have stayed in bed, snuggled up and warm, and awoken at my leisure.

Instead, I was up at the godawful hour of six-thirty, pulling myself sleepily from the cocoon of my blankets. My bathrobe was pulled on over my pajamas more out of habit than intent, and my cold feet were stuffed into a pair of slippers, before I made my way to start the day.

A glance down the hall as I opened my door showed Rin's still closed shut. I had probably half an hour before she actually managed to pull herself from her bed, because this was the first day back to school and she'd let herself fall out of the habit of getting up at six-thirty on the dot.

Why was I forcing myself to wake up this early, again? Oh right. Plans. Plans that I had to stick to, since they were literally a matter of life and death.

If only the Holy Grail War could have done us all the courtesy of happening during summer vacation. At least if we were all risking our lives in a dangerous battle royale, couldn't we have been doing it comfortably warm?

"Of course not," I groused to the open air. "That would make too much sense, wouldn't it?"

And common sense and magi weren't on speaking terms, let alone a first name basis.

Down the stairs I went, and with a little bit of effort, I fumbled my way through putting on a pot of tea for myself. While the water was heating up, I set about making a quick breakfast, a simple meal that I wasn't sure I didn't put together sleepwalking. I did make sure, though, to make some toast for Rin and put a pot on for some sencha. That girl would probably go the rest of the day until lunch without having touched anything else in terms of food.

The torture she put herself through because she was scared of putting on just one extra pound.

By the time I was finished eating, my tea was ready, so I sweetened it to my liking and took it to the living room, where I sat down with a sigh and relaxed a little. Since I was going to be getting precious little of that in the coming days, I fully intended to grab what I could as and when I could. Stress was the enemy, and I was soon to be beset from all sides.

For those precious few minutes, I sipped tranquilly at my tea. The room around me was silent, but for the ticking of the clock. There was something to be said for the quiet of suburban living, even if this was still technically a part of Fuyuki city. The calm, peaceful atmosphere, devoid of the hustle and bustle of a living city thriving just outside your window, was much easier to enjoy than trying to ignore the eleventh car backfiring or thousandth gasp of one streaking down the street.

Just shy of seven o'clock, a thump sounded from upstairs, and it was followed a moment later by a series of slower, softer thumps as someone dragged herself out of bed begrudgingly.

I hummed and took another sip of tea. Looked like Rin was finally awake.

Sure enough, a minute or two later, she stalked down the steps, disheveled and bleary-eyed and dressed only in her nightgown and a pair of slippers. She held onto the bannister, swaying slightly and tilting dangerously, as though it was the only thing keeping her from falling. It just might have been.

"Morning, Rin," I greeted mildly.

"Mo — orning, Yukio," she mumbled back, interrupted by a yawn halfway through.

"I made you some toast and put some water on for sencha," I called out to her as she stumbled her way over to the kitchen. She offered me a muttered, incoherent thanks, and shuffled towards the smell of her toast.

That girl... Really not a morning person, huh?

She came in about five or ten minutes later, one piece of toast hanging limply from her mouth and the other set on a plate she was carrying with her. In her other hand, she held a steaming mug of sweet-smelling sencha, and she set it on a saucer on the coffee table, then plopped down next to me unceremoniously.

"Hey!" I said, holding up my mug as the tea inside sloshed. "Watch it! If this had been full, you'd be cleaning up a mess!"

She grunted something unintelligible around her toast, and then proceeded to ignore me and munch on it over her plate. When she'd finished off the first piece, she set down the plate with the second, picked up her mug of sencha, and took a deep, long sip.

"Mmmm," she hummed slowly. "I feel like a human being, again."

My lips quirked to one side. "As opposed to what? A vegetable?"

"A vampire." She slid me a glance. "I was thinking of sucking some of your blood, but then I realized I'd probably get diabetes, so I decided it was better to just have some regular food."

"Good thing, too," I said, playing into the joke. "I like my blood just where it is, thank you."

She snorted and picked up her second piece of toast. "What's the word for that? Tyranophobia?"

"A good thing there aren't any more T-rexes walking around, or else I might be in trouble," I said dryly. "The word you're looking for is trypanophobia. And it's not. I have a perfectly rational aversion to having sharp, thin objects jabbed into my body."

"Really? It doesn't sound very rational to me."

“This from the woman who just recently bemoaned my lack of Japanese preference in tea, and yet herself prefers milk teas instead of matcha or sencha.”

“H-hey!” she said indignantly. “Milk tea is a perfectly Japanese tea preference, I’ll have you know! For that matter, do they even sell them in England? Seems strange to me, considering they add milk to their tea anyway!”

“It’s not a very traditionally Japanese preference, though, is it?” I remarked mildly.

Rin huffed. “Better than guzzling down sweetened black tea all the time. How have you not put on fifty pounds from all the sweets you eat?”

“By working out. Vigorously.” I slid her a suggestive glance, and a moment later, her cheeks exploded with bright red. “But mostly understanding this thing called moderation. It’s fine to enjoy desserts and sweet snacks, as long as you know how much you should and shouldn’t have. Plus, well, there *are* a few perks to being an expert in medicinal magecraft.”

She rolled her eyes.

“By cheating, you mean,” she said flatly.

“If you’re not cheating, you’re not playing to win,” I said, dry as bone. “Besides. Cheating is only cheating when the other guy is doing it.”

Rin snorted a little.

“As long as you’re the one telling the story, you get to say it was just an application of creative thinking, is that right?”

“*Now* you’re catching on!” I said brightly. “Welcome to History 101, Rin-chan! If you’re the winner, you get to spin the story however you want!”

She shook her head, drained the last of her sencha with something of a grimace, and promptly stood.

“I’d better get going,” she said wryly. “If I sit here with you too long, all of that hypocrisy is liable to rub off on me, and then where would I be?”

“The same place you are now: pretending you’re nothing more than an ordinary school idol, bright but completely and utterly normal.”

She chuckled and disappeared back up the stairs. I sighed and looked mournfully down at my empty mug of tea.

“Guess I’d better get going, too,” I said to myself. “If I dawdle too much, she’ll leave before me, and then things will just be awkward, won’t they?”

My mug went into the sink, to be washed later, and I climbed the stairs back up to my room to quickly go through my morning ablutions. Then, I dressed in my usual attire, a white button-up, a

black vest, a blue silk tie, and a pair of nice jeans, a masculine mirror to one of my sister's outfits that I couldn't actually remember her ever wearing.

I slipped on a black jacket and my favorite red scarf and made my way downstairs, but Rin was faster than me, because I'd fallen out of practice since I hadn't had to rush to get ready for school in years, and she was already sliding her shoes on at the front door. It was already shutting behind her by the time I made it to the shallow well at the entrance where my own shoes were set aside. I had to race through putting them on, and then I lost several seconds more activating the defenses of the house's bounded field.

Rin was already well on her way to school, so I had to make long, quick strides as I tried to catch up with her, but I knew I'd get an earful if I broke our family's "image" of elegance and grace, so I made sure not to break into a run. When I'd finally managed to get within arm's length of her, I put on an extra little spurt of speed, slid up next to her —

"Leaving without me?"

— and hooked my arm around hers.

She stumbled and turned to look at me, eyes wide and expression completely unguarded. "Yukio?" she blurted out. "What are you doing?"

"Walking you to school. What does it look like I'm doing?" I told her with an utterly innocent smile.

She blanched and quickly looked around, then leaned in and hissed, "You can't! Do you have any idea what that would look like to my classmates, having my older brother escorting me to *high school*?"

"Oh, so you admit that I'm older, now," I said, mercilessly attacking her weak points.

"That's not what I — !"

She clamped her mouth shut before anyone could notice her raised voice. Quieter, she said, "That's not what I meant, and you know it! It's a matter of their perceptions, and since you've already graduated, they think of you as being more mature."

"You worry too much." I waved her off. "People will be more focused on the fact I'm there than the fact I came with you. It won't be that unusual, anyway. We used to walk to school together everyday, after all."

"That's not how that works, don't pretend otherwise!"

"Plus," I deployed my trump card, "I wanted to check up on Sakura."

She paused, the words she'd been about to say frozen on the tip of her tongue, and then she sighed. "Fine," she said, and then she pulled her arm free of mine, "but we're not going their arm in arm. I don't know what sort of crazy nonsense you've been exposed to in London, but here in Japan, public displays of affection like that are considered culturally inappropriate."

"You can only hide behind that excuse for so long, Rin-chan."

Her cheeks flushed. “Idiot. Why did I have to be stuck with someone like you for a twin brother, anyway? And stop calling me Rin-chan!”

We made the trek to Homurahara in mostly silence. Rin didn’t try to strike up much conversation — in fact, as we walked and more and more of her classmates saw us, staring at me and muttering, she tried to shrink in on herself and her face became increasingly red. I could almost hear the litany of embarrassed moaning that must have been going on in her head as she mentally lamented my presence.

I took it all in stride. Really, in the Clock Tower, learning how to ignore insults and just keep moving on with your life was an essential skill if you wanted to last with your sanity intact past the first month.

A bunch of teenagers gossiping while they thought I couldn’t hear was nothing when compared to snide comments from rich and powerful magi who knew I *could*.

We arrived at the school gates with something of a crowd around us, all giving us wide berth as they passed us by, and standing there as though she had been specifically waiting for us —

“Yo, good morning, Tohsak — aaaaaaaaaah?”

— was a familiar tomboyish archer.

“Good morning, Mitsuzuri-san,” Rin said politely. “Is there something off about my appearance, today? I’m not sure what I’ve done to warrant a response like that.”

Mitsuzuri Ayako’s face twisted. “I... You... Just... You brought your *brother* here?”

“I didn’t bring him so much as he brought himself,” Rin replied sardonically. “No matter what I might have said on the matter.”

“Good morning, Mitsuzuri-san,” I told her. “Ah, don’t mind me. I’m just indulging some nostalgia, right now.”

“Nostalgia?” Mitsuzuri asked incredulously. The way Rin eyed me said that she didn’t believe a single word of it, either.

“It’s been a few years, so I wanted to come back and relive a little of the experience of attending high school.”

Neither of them believed *that*, either. Well. That wasn’t as important as keeping the *real* reason secret. You didn’t have to lie well to throw someone off. You just had to lie so badly that they never realized what you were trying to avoid admitting to.

“Perhaps he misses the days when he had legions of schoolgirls pining after him day and night,” Rin suggested cruelly.

“Oh, that’s only natural,” Mitsuzuri agreed, picking up the thread and running with it. “After all, he’s only a teenage boy. Imagine what it must be like to be considered so desirable by so many girls?”

“It was never legions.” But I couldn’t stop the thread of doubt that wormed its way into my gut, and despite knowing I was walking into a trap, I couldn’t stop my mouth, either. “Was it?”

Mitsuzuri and Rin shared a conspiring look and a devious smile.

“Oh, there were so very many, Yukio, and they’ve only grown more numerous in your absence.”

“There’s even an unofficial fan club dedicated to you in the school,” Mitsuzuri added. “In fact, I’ve heard that they’ve made attempts to be officially recognized by the administration.”

I didn’t need a mirror to know exactly how ugly the horrified grimace was on my face.

“Please tell me you’re joking and none of that is actually true.”

“I didn’t tell you before?” Rin asked mildly, tossing her hair back over her shoulder. She acted like she’d just realized she hadn’t told me she bought a new pair of shoes. “I suppose I’d simply forgotten to mention it. It’s true, Yukio. All of the girls pining after you are trying to make an official Tohsaka Yukio fanclub. I hear they’ve even got a shrine dedicated to you in one of the clubrooms they frequent. Somehow, they even managed to acquire a lock of your hair.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” said Mitsuzuri. “Yukio-kun, I know I’m not your type of girl. After all, I don’t have long, dark hair or startling blue eyes —”

Rin sputtered. “Just what are you trying to imply there, Ayako!”

I felt my cheeks grow hot.

“— but would you consider being my boyfriend?”

“Wait!” Rin interjected. “Don’t tell me *this* is how you intend on winning our bet!”

“Why not?” said Mitsuzuri, unfazed. “He’s handsome, respectable, talented, and I had a crush on him for quite a while. There was never any rule in our bet that I couldn’t hook up with your brother, Tohsaka.”

“That’s cheating!” Rin protested.

“Ah, Mitsuzuri...” I tried. “That is, it’s not that I dislike you, per se, but... U-um, how should I say this...”

“That’s a no, huh?” She didn’t seem surprised; she just shrugged. “Yeah, it was a longshot. Worth a try, though, right?”

“Don’t you have club practice to go to?” Rin pointed out irritably.

Mitsuzuri didn’t stop grinning. “I guess I do. I should probably get to that, then. See you around, Tohsaka, Yukio!”

A miserable groan slipped out of my lips as she walked away, and I had to rub at my eyes just so that I could cover up my flaming cheeks and disguise my embarrassment. “You’re sure she’s over her crush?” I asked my sister.

“Sometimes, I wonder,” Rin answered sardonically. She huffed. “I don’t know what she was thinking, asking you of all people to go out with her. She knows —”

Her mouth suddenly clamped shut, and I looked over at her curiously.

“She knows what?”

“She knows how important you are to me,” Rin managed, sounding with every word as though she were dragging the admission out of some box with rusted hinges where she’d locked it away a long time ago. “She knows that I would never forgive her if she toyed with you and broke your heart.”

I blinked, and something warm kindled in my chest.

“Rin...”

“Wipe that stupid look off your face,” she grumbled, a faint dusting of pink spreading over her cheeks. “I didn’t say anything unusual, so stop acting like it’s strange that I actually care about you.”

I smiled and let it go with a laugh. “Sorry. I guess I just don’t hear it very often from you, so I cherish it when I do.”

She mumbled something under her breath that might have been “idiot,” and then shook her head. “I’m going to go to class, before I’m late,” she announced, like she didn’t have almost half an hour before school officially started. “Don’t do something unnecessary, like coming to pick me up after school, got it?”

My smile gained teeth and she groaned.

“You totally will, won’t you? Ugh. I can’t deal with this, right now. It’s way too early in the morning.”

And without another word, she strode off, heading towards the campus’s main building. A fond sigh whistled out past my lips as I watched her go.

“That girl...”

I shook my head and turned towards the archery range — and nearly bowled over a short, dark-haired girl dressed in a Homurahara uniform who seemed to have been waiting behind us for Rin to walk away. She gave out a high-pitched squeak as I steadied her and myself so we didn’t topple, because the very last thing I wanted right now was to be the protagonist in some romantic comedy and fall on top of her.

The absolute worst thing would be if I accidentally copped a feel in the process. Like this was some kind of shoujo anime.

“Are you okay?” I asked her politely.

“Y-yes!” she said nervously.

“Sorry, I wasn’t paying enough attention and I almost knocked you over.”

“I-it’s fine!” she exclaimed.

Movement from behind her caught my eye, and I looked over her shoulder — over her head, really, because I might have been average in London, but here I was tall — and spied a group of girls off to the side, watching us. Like vultures waiting for their prey to finally die, refusing to look away for even a second.

The dots connected, and I drew the only conclusion that made sense.

Oh. Oh dear. Please don’t let this be what I think it is.

I looked back at the girl, took her in again, examining the details more closely this time. Dark hair, pale skin, slender and waifish, and while that was so generic a description that it could fit just about any Japanese schoolgirl, there was a niggling sense of familiarity. Old, worn, like I hadn’t touched it in years.

She was one of my classmates, wasn’t she? From back before I tested out and graduated early.

The only trouble was...I’d paid about as much attention to my yearmates back then as a fox might a flea — engaging with them only when it was unavoidable, and only so long as it took to convince them to leave me alone while still fulfilling my social obligations.

“Was there something you needed?” I specifically used a diminutive, whatever that said about me, to try and convey that I saw her as young and immature, hoping she got the hint.

“U-um... That is, I... I’ve...”

Oh, Christ above, this is painful.

“Yes?”

At last, she seemed to draw herself up and muster her courage, rallying behind some well of determination.

“Yukio-kun,” the girl said, and for the life of me, I couldn’t remember her name. “I-I’ve been waiting for you to come back to Fuyuki. These past few m-months, I’ve been preparing my h-heart, and that’s why... That’s why I...”

She thrust out her hands, and held tight between her fingers was a plain, white envelope. Her cheeks were bright red, and just keeping eye contact seemed like it was a Herculean task for her.

“This!”

The gaggle of girls behind her gasped and broke out into whispers — the vultures circling. I did my best to pretend they weren't there as I looked down at the simple, unadorned envelope with resignation. My gut twisted up into knots.

I hated what I was about to do to this girl. I hated that I had to do it. It made me feel like a jerk, like I was kicking a puppy that just wanted to be petted.

But it wasn't fair to me to have to pretend, and it wasn't fair to her for me to lead her on.

"Listen," I said quietly, pointedly ignoring the envelope, "this isn't what you're going to want to hear, and I know it's going to feel like your heart is getting ripped out of your chest —"

Her hands began to tremble and her eyes started to water, like she could sense the blow coming and couldn't get out of the way.

"— but I'm not interested. It's nothing to do with you or your age or —"

But she'd already turned away, sobbing, and raced off past her group of friends. They all gave a gasp and a horrified shout as one and spared me only the time and effort of a fiery glare before they gave chase. No doubt, by the end of the day, the same girls who had told her to take the chance would be telling her that I was a no good, evil scoundrel, and she was better off without me.

"Or how attractive you are," I told the air. "In fact, I'm sure you're a very lovely girl. It's just that I have no room in my life for romance, right now. You should definitely find love with someone who actually remembers your name."

I carded a hand through my hair, sighing, and frowned at the empty space they'd all occupied. Nothing to be done about it, really. At least she hadn't broken down and collapsed into tears on the ground in front of me.

Trying to put the incident out of my mind, I continued my journey to the archery range and stepped inside.

By this point, everyone who was going to arrive for the Archery Club's morning practice was already there, suited up and practicing. The *thwip* of bowstrings cutting through the air was thick, and most of them were so focused on the task that they didn't notice me come in at all.

Most of them. Mitsuzuri noticed me immediately and came over.

"Did you rethink my offer, Yukio?" she asked with a sly, fox-like grin.

My lips twitched, but I managed to keep my grimace mostly contained.

"Not at all," I said casually, affecting polite disinterest. "I simply came to check up on an old friend."

I let my gaze wander the line until it found a particular head of dark hair perched atop a particular pair of shoulders. The ornamentation was still in place, and it made my heart ache every time I saw it.

But I couldn't afford to linger and I couldn't afford for my attention to be noted by a particular person especially, so I took only as long as I thought would go unnoticed — only long enough to drink in the sight of my target, to make sure they were as okay as could be expected, only long enough to sate my conscience — before I turned my eyes back to Mitsuzuri.

“It looks like you still haven't managed to get Emiya-kun back into the club, though.”

Mitsuzuri sighed and put her hands on her hips. “Yeah, that guy just can't be persuaded. No matter how much I or Fujimura-sensei tries, he still refuses to return to the Archery Club. With a guy like him on the team, we could take any championship we wanted.”

“Some people just can't be convinced, I suppose.” I shook my head for effect. “Well, that's all I was here for, so there's no reason for me to stay. Have a good day, Mitsuzuri-san.”

“Later, Yukio.”

I stole one last glance back at the line of archery students, one last glance at the person who still suffered only because I wasn't good enough.

It looks like you're doing okay, Sakura, at least for now.

And then I turned and did the hardest thing.

I walked away.