

## Let Fate Decide

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# Let Fate Decide

by [AriaDream](#)

## Summary

Hi everyone! I can't read Japanese and to my great disappointment, I'm told Ashiya Douman only shows up late in the 5.5 Singularity. So this is an alternate story when Ritsuka summons Caster Douman without support and has to conquer a Singularity with only one Servant! There will be bloodshed, violence and romance. :) Also, my own take on Douman and Abe no Seimei. Enjoy!

# Chapter 1

*What do I do now?*

Ritsuka looked around blankly at the surrounding woods, then up at the sky. It was a beautiful spring day, clear and lovely but also a bit cold. A brisk wind stirred her hair and ruffled her uniform, making the leaves of the trees around her rustle. Ritsuka turned around slowly, gazing over the woods. It was so hard to be sure, she was no kind of specialist in horticulture, but these trees... did they look familiar? Was that a Japanese maple? Ritsuka bit her lip, wishing she understood what was happening.

“Mash?” Nothing. “Sherlock? Da Vinci?” Nothing, nothing. “...This is so bad.” Ritsuka whispered, reflecting on how this had happened in the first place.

This place was a powerful Singularity WITHIN a Lost Belt, like a small pearl encased in an oyster. Unfortunately, it also seemed to hold the Lost Belt tree, so they couldn't just ignore it. But penetrating it with the Shadow Border just wasn't possible – Da Vinci had a technical explanation that Ritsuka couldn't follow – so they had to perform a modified Rayshift, as if it was a real Singularity. Something had gone hideously wrong, though. She was supposed to Rayshift in with Mash and they were going to set up a summoning circle to summon Servants native to the era...

“AH!” Ritsuka gasped as she suddenly felt a sharp pain in her hand, grabbing it reflexively. Then she forced herself to let go of it and look, seeing the Command Seals on her hand pulsing like a living thing. That was different, that had never happened before, what did it mean? Then the seals suddenly stopped, fading to their normal lustre and Ritsuka rubbed them, wondering what that –

“Well.” AH! Ritsuka nearly jumped out of her skin before whirling around to see a stranger – oh. Oh god, he wasn't a stranger! “Are you my Master?” Obsidian eyes in a painfully beautiful face travelled down her before that face twisted in a sneer. Even that was strikingly beautiful and made Ritsuka's heart beat faster. “What an absolutely wretched shirt. Who designed that abomination of fashion?” Oh! Ritsuka's face heated as she glanced down at her Chaldean uniform. Then she forced herself to look at her... Servant?

“I don't know, exactly...” Ritsuka said, just playing for time a bit as she examined “Limbo”. To her utter relief, he wasn't quite the same as the monster she'd met before. Instead of an Alter-Ego, this was a Caster and his clothing was... was more abbreviated than what she'd seen before. Ritsuka's eyes were briefly glued to a chiseled chest and she almost missed his irritated sigh.

“Don't know? What kind of dullard completes a summoning for a Grail War then doesn't know if they are a Master?” Mockery dripped from every syllable and Ritsuka internally cringed. But before she could say anything more, Ashiya Douman glanced around and his brows pulled down, his beautiful face shifting to a frown. “No... I'm the idiot. This is an empty forest in the middle of the day, there's no summoning circle... not even the most

incompetent magus in the world would attempt a summoning in this setting. Not even the GREATEST of mages COULD! This is a spontaneous summoning?” His hand darted out and Ritsuka couldn’t evade him as he grasped her hand, looking at the command seals. As he did she noticed that his nails were shorter than the Alter-Ego’s, dark and cloudy but looking more like tinted human nails than diseased claws. “Hmph. How exceedingly unusual... but it’s not mine to question why I suppose. Are you my Master?” He made his demand again and this time, Ritsuka had made up her mind.

“Yes, I am your Master.” The contract was immediately forged and Ritsuka felt it click into place as easily as breathing. Douman smiled, which started almost friendly but then turned into a toothy, malicious grin.

“Excellent. I am ready to demonstrate my pre-eminence to the world once again! But first order of business is to fix this. I won’t have my Master embarrassing me.” Douman snapped his fingers and Ritsuka jolted as her body was suddenly draped in heavy silk. Looking down she gasped at the kimono she was wearing. It was a gorgeous shade of green, embroidered with small flowers and beautifully made but – “No, tch, I’m being foolish, you need to be able to walk.” Was he reading her mind? His fingers snapped again and to Ritsuka’s relief, she was wearing a simple kimono in a dusty grey, shading to rust. It was actually quite beautiful for such a simple garment.

“What about yourself?” Obsidian eyes were hard as a stone but Ritsuka met them fearlessly, hiding her qualms. Dealing with evil Servants required a strong will at the best of times. “Can you make yourself less... obvious?” His costume was odd, to say the least.

“Oh... very well.” Douman snapped his fingers one last time, and clothed himself in another simple kimono, this one jet black with accents of white. His hair also shifted, moving from white and black stripes to simple black. Ritsuka wasn’t sure how much good it would do – he was still gorgeous and striking – but they at least had some small hope of passing unnoticed. “Hmm...” He stretched out his hands and regarded his nails, which shortened even further and lost their lustre, reverting to human nails. “That’s the best I can do. I doubt even the mentally deficient would truly mistake us for commoners, but there’s no help for it. I shall give us both something a bit more suitable when we reach a large enough town.”

“It’s fine... do you know where to go?” Could he use his magic to determine where there might be a settlement? Ashiya tilted his head back for a moment, gazing into the sky and Ritsuka saw his eyes go vague and preoccupied. If anything, that made him more devastatingly attractive and she swallowed hard. *How did I summon him as a Servant?*

“Hm... there’s a leyline in that direction,” he muttered before gesturing towards a thick bramble. Ritsuka groaned internally. “And it’s not guaranteed by any means, but humans tend to cluster along leylines. If we find it and follow it, we’re likely to find a village or town.” Ah. Yes, he was right, it was a natural tendency.

“Then let’s go,” Ritsuka said firmly, aware that they shouldn’t linger here. It wasn’t likely but summoning involved a burst of prana and someone could have detected it. Not to mention that there simply wasn’t a reason to linger in the forest. Douman nodded curtly before taking the lead and to Ritsuka’s relief, he employed the cards he carried as familiars, sending them flying in front of him like machetes to clear the worst of the brush. That was so much more

pleasant than forcing their way through the overgrown patches of the forest. As they walked, Ritsuka glanced at Douman but he seemed preoccupied, his face set in a small frown.

What was he thinking?

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*What is she thinking?*

Ashiya Douman glanced surreptitiously at his new “Master.” She was gazing ahead with an air of preoccupation. For a brief moment, he admired her beauty. Oh, her face was not the most gorgeous he’d seen, but it didn’t need to be when her skin was so wonderfully pale. And that hair like fire! In a man that oni color would have been thought unlucky but in a woman it was desirable. It was just as well her face was not stunningly beautiful or he might have to defend her from errant nobles attempting to take her as a concubine! It already might be a problem.

That was hardly the problem that occupied his mind at the moment, though. That was more fundamental and Douman frowned as he thought about it. *A spontaneous summoning into a Grail War?* Because this WAS a Grail War, he knew that from the knowledge the summoning had imparted to him. *That should not be possible.* It was madness! And why had HE been the one summoned? A spontaneous summoning should pick the Servant with greatest compatibility with the Master and Douman was sure he was not THAT. Even the tentative connection he had to his Master told him as much.

The Grail though. Something was wrong with that as well. Douman’s frown deepened as he flicked a wrist, using his familiars to create a bridge over a small creek. He had a very firm conviction, verging on absolute certainty, that this was his own time, the Heian period. Yet he somehow had a knowledge that the Grail itself was a creation of the more modern times. For a moment, he admired the makers of it. Making Servants sacrifice each other in a twisted contest, so the magi could use their souls to obtain ultimate power... how wonderfully sadistic! How twisted and cruel! But that was wrong as well, if he needed more wrongness piled on wrongness. Why was he being given this information? The Grail participants should be oblivious to this fact. Was his awareness related to his abnormal summoning? Did it follow that his Master did not desire the ultimate power that the Grail represented?

“Master, we seem to have neglected the formalities. May I request your name?” Douman asked, fully aware of the mocking tone his voice carried. It wasn’t even under his control anymore, it was so ingrained. His Master did not seem intimidated.

“Oh, I’m sorry! I’m Fumimaru Ritsuka.” Ritsuka. A pretty name.

“I am Ashiya Douman.” Ritsuka glanced down and Douman had the feeling she was unsurprised. Interesting. “You know of my story?”

“Actually, not really.” No? That pricked his ego, but mainly his curiosity. If she didn’t know OF him, why had she seemed so... accepting of his identity? “I know you were Abe no Seimei’s greatest rival but that’s all.” Douman tensed as a flash of pure *hate* flowed through him.

“Do not mention that bastard son of a kitsune again,” he said with all of his considerable venom. Ritsuka looked at him with a troubled air. “I killed him before and I will kill him again.” That was his fondest wish, that he’d answered the summons of the Grail for, to see the asshole’s throat beneath his nails once again.

“Why do you hate him so much?” Ritsuka asked with a simplicity that almost took his breath away. Douman didn’t even know how to respond, fumbling for a moment at such a – a *simpleminded* question. Was it not *obvious*?

“He was Abe no Seimei!” To anyone in the palace that would have elicited a pained wince, a small nod of commiseration or a studiously blank look. “He was unique in his utter chicanery!” Douman knew he was going to rant, his Master surely didn’t want to hear this, but it had become the singular focus of his life. “He was so smooth, he could have been coated in lard! If my words are dipped in malice, his were dipped in falseness! His pretense of civility and sweetness disguised that he was rotten to the core!” Although it didn’t really take too long to see past that. It didn’t matter, though, when Seimei was just that charming. “I loathed that man beyond all words! My defeat was bad enough, but it hardly ended there!” The pranks, the jokes, the utter IMBECILITY he’d been forced to endure! “I’m sure history wrote me as the villain but it was not just my doing, oh no,” Douman spat out, raging bitterly in his own mind. Oh yes, he’d been the bad one, never mind the LIVING HELL that half-kitsune asshole had put him through! “I was so glad he was dead and then the bastard had the gall to COME BACK! He would toy even with death! Mark my words, Master, I doubt death has ever claimed his soul!” Douman took a deep breath, deliberately attempting to calm himself. It was so hard though, so hard, when the topic of conversation was Abe no Seimei. “I at least had the decency to stay dead when my throat was cut!”

“They do call say that Abe no Seimei was a lot like Merlin.” Ritsuka sounded troubled and Douman frowned as the knowledge of the Grail rattled through him. Merlin, the great mage of the barbarous East, the architect of King Arthur and Camelot, was similar to Abe no Seimei? “And you keep calling him the bastard son of a kitsune... Merlin was the child of a succubus.” Oh really?

“Kitsune are not necessarily evil, but they are always troublesome and mischievous, no matter how they might try to be good,” Douman said, giving more attention to the trail. They were getting close to the leyline and the forest was becoming sparser. Did he hear water? “The leyline is following a river? It WILL lead to a town then.” But would they reach it before nightfall? Well, if not they would camp. Although the complete lack of supplies would be a hindrance. Well, it would hardly be the first time for THAT.

Forcing away one particular unpleasant memory – Abe no Seimei could DIE IN A FIRE – Douman led them to the river and found, to his pleasure, that the path on the banks was relatively clear. They were able to skip along it, slipping into the forest or hugging the bank of the river, grabbing a tree or two for purchase. The sun was falling, though, with no sign of a single other person, let alone a village. Douman came to a rather irritating conclusion.

“We should make camp for the night, Master, before the sun has entirely fallen.” Douman didn’t like the thought of travelling through these woods in the dark. Oh, there SHOULD be nothing more fell wandering about than himself, but his Master could always trip on a root

and fall into the river. It wouldn't even be that hard to do, the ground on the banks was slippery. He heard a heavy sigh and Douman interpreted it easily. "Hungry Master? Have no fear, I will supply the food."

"Oh, with magic?" Ritsuka asked hopefully and Douman laughed before shaking his head.

"No, that never works." The food would taste good and feel substantial, but do nothing to actually support life. "I'll catch some fish." They had a river right here and he could easily cast a lure. Combined with his clairvoyance, Douman was confident that he'd have a few great big fish to fill his Master's belly in no time. "Can my Master gather the wood and start a fire?" She was a magus after all, if a rather poor one from what he could sense. But even the rankest of apprentices could start a fire.

"I would be glad to and this is a perfect spot." Yes, that was the other reason to stop now, they had found a nice open spot beside the river, padded with moss. The ground would not be entirely comfortable even so, but it was nicer than most. "Thank you so much Douman," Ritsuka said with a smile and for a moment, he just savored it, being smiled at by a pretty young woman. Ah, how long it had been since he'd had that experience! Smiling to himself, Douman dispelled his kimono and then hiked up pants, before wading into the river. Letting his nails return to their proper form, he cast the lure on his claws before staring into the water and patiently waiting for the fish.

This kind of fishing required patience and after stalking that bastard son of a kitsune for decades, that was something Ashiya Douman was a true master at.

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*He is absolutely incredible,* Ritsuka thought in awe as she used her chopsticks to eat the delicious, braised fish from a blue and white china bowl as she sat by the fire.

When Ashiya Douman had said he would catch fish, Ritsuka had imagined they would grill them over an open fire and she'd been perfectly happy with that. It would be her first meal of the day and her stomach was painfully empty, so anything was wonderful. However, what Douman had said about being unable to magically create food applied only to the food itself. With a snap of his fingers he'd whipped up a pot, condiments, bowls and cutlery and then fileted the fish with expert skill. Then, if that wasn't enough, he'd proceeded to cook the fish to perfection. The only other Servant this handy was Tawara Tota!

When she finally came up for air, Ritsuka thought to ask him about it. Douman shrugged a little, from his spot by the fire, but answered the question.

"It may surprise you, but I was not born into wealth. I learned to cook from a fairly young age. As for the magic, there were *incidents* that led to very long trips with absolutely no support." His tone was withering and Ritsuka already knew what that meant... Abe no Seimei had done something. "Adversity is an excellent teacher, and I learned how to make myself comfortable. After all, even if we are condemned to live in the howling wilderness does not mean we must live like wolves." That made Ritsuka wonder how long he'd spent travelling.

“You would definitely get along with Tawara Tota. His rice would go wonderfully with your fish,” Ritsuka said with a smile, fishing out another piece of fish and popping it in her mouth. Oh, rice would make this better, sopping up the savory sauce. It tasted of soy sauce, mirin and ginger, mmm.

“Hmmm, who is that?” Ritsuka might have answered after she swallowed the fish, but Douman cocked his head to one side, his obsidian eyes going vague as he communed with... the Grail? Ritsuka did know that a Grail would impart knowledge to the summoned Servants. “I see, a warrior... the timeline is vague, I think he lived after I died. But for an endless bag of rice, I would put up with a meathead archer.” Well... maybe they wouldn’t get along THAT well... although Ritsuka could see Tawara cheerfully saying he’d put up with a dour mage for fish. “Let me know if you need more food, Master, and I will catch more.”

“Oh no, this should be plenty!” Ritsuka said hastily, horrified by the thought of making him do even more. And he’d caught two lovely fish and was leaving them all for her – understandable, Servants didn’t need to eat – but it was more than enough. Douman hummed softly, looking into the fire and Ritsuka had the odd feeling that he was waiting for something. Wait, was he waiting for her to be done the food? The thought made her stomach tighten a little but Ritsuka put it aside, just enjoying the fish. Of course her Servant would have some questions.

*At least he isn’t Caster of Limbo.* That was a true relief and Ritsuka thought she understood what had happened. The Ashiya Douman summoned by the alien tree was an Alter Ego, a kind of caricature of the real person named Ashiya Douman. The Caster version had an identical face and body, but just from what little conversation she’d had with them both, Ritsuka thought he had more depth. *This is the man that lay behind the myth.* Not a good man, not at all, but not the incarnation of evil that myth had branded him. How would the Alter Ego react to this? ...How would the Caster? Because Ritsuka was certain Limbo had to be in this Singularity.

When the final piece of fish had vanished, Douman snapped his fingers and the dishes magically disappeared. Then, the time for explanations came.

“Master, I think you must be honest with your Servant,” Douman said with an icy chill, his eyes like polished obsidian. Ritsuka swallowed, feeling the weight of his suspicion.

“Spontaneous summons in a Grail War simply do not happen. What are the circumstances surrounding this?” For a brief moment, Ritsuka contemplated lying. But no, he would see through her, and a Master-Servant bond had to be built on trust.

“Douman... this is a Singularity.” His brow furrowed and Ritsuka struggled to explain. “It’s like a cut off piece of time, a hole torn in the regular continuum.” And this one was also inside a Lost Belt but they really didn’t need to go into that. “I don’t know exactly what is behind it but it must have a lot to do with the Grail War, and also a mystical tree we call the Tree of Emptiness. I have to cut down that tree, that’s all I want.” Douman cocked his head to one side, regarding her with steadily. Ritsuka met his gaze steadily, hoping he wasn’t going to –

“And is this Tree likely entangled with the Grail, making my wish impossible?” Ritsuka flinched because that was exactly what she’d been thinking. Douman made a hmph sound.



“Why should I fight in this war then?” His words dripped with malice and Ritsuka felt her mouth go dry. But she could handle this, she’d handled Saber Alter when all the hamburgers were gone!

“Because it’s the right thing to do.” Douman’s eyes widened and he seemed taken aback at the thought of *doing the right thing*. But Ritsuka had expected that so she sailed on serenely. “And while I THINK the Grail is probably entangled with the Tree, I don’t KNOW that. If it’s free to be used, I promise it to you.” Douman smiled, which quickly turned into his toothy grin. It reminded her a bit too much of the Alter Ego version. “Just please, don’t wish to kill Abe no Seimei over and over again for all eternity.”

“But that was exactly what I wanted! ...I’m joking, I just want to finally humble that damned kitsune. Once is enough.” From the vindictive venom in his voice, though, that humbling would be... extreme. Well, it probably wasn’t going to happen. “So are you asking me to lay my hopes on a roll of the dice, Master?”

“Yes. Are you willing to take a chance?” Ritsuka asked, hoping that he was. Most Servants were, when push came to shove... they were already dead, after all, so they had very little to lose. Douman mulled it over for a long moment, gazing into the fire. Then he suddenly grinned.

“Ah, why not? I’ve already given my life to fate! What more do I have to lose?!” Ritsuka blinked at the echoing of her thoughts. “And this is the time I lived so maybe I don’t even need the Grail for my wish. Ah, my old nemesis, I hope I meet you again!” ...Urp... that was possible too. Ritsuka shuddered a little at the thought. “Well Master, it’s going to get very cold this time of year. Let me make a little nest for you.” Douman’s tone made that innocent little statement sound absolutely sinful. Ritsuka swallowed as she was hit directly in the libido. How could he BE so attractive?

Fortunately, or not, Douman was a perfect gentleman as he materialized warm blankets and helped her form them into a nice cocoon. The ground was still lump and uneven but Ritsuka had had much worse and toasty warm, she quickly and easily drifted off. The dark, strong beat of power that was her Servant was comforting.

Ritsuka wanted Mash more than anyone else, but Ashiya Douman was surprisingly good company.

## Chapter 2

Ashiya Douman was a naturally early riser. It had pleased his wife (formerly Abe no Seimei's wife) and it served him well in general. Including now, when he awoke long before his Master.

*Tch, spring mornings.* It was so cold there was a bit of frost on the ground. Tapping his nails in irritation, he glanced over at his Master and was pleased to see that the minor charm he'd put on the blankets was working well. It specifically warmed the air around her head and face, just a touch, to make it much easier to breath and stay asleep in such occasions. *And isn't it a sad thing that I needed that?* He had SO MANY spells related to living in rough conditions.

Setting that aside for the moment – there WOULD BE revenge – Douman stood and slowly stretched, popping every joint. THAT was a habit his wife had hated, the sound of joints popping made her cringe, but fortunately he'd usually gotten it out of the way while she still slept. That done, he glanced up at the still darkened sky and considered his Master's words.

*A Singularity.* From what little he could determine based on her rather vague description, it sounded like an extremely grandiose Reality Marble. That was VERY impressive and from what he knew of the Grail, Douman was sure it could be used to accomplish that. It would need to be heavily draining the leylines and then using that power to create the marble. Could he find any sign of it?

Tilting his head back, Douman closed his eyes and breathed out, seeking a place of perfect calm. He found it with the ease of long practice and then let his mind and senses ghost out, seeking any sign that he was in fact entrapped within this "Singularity". He was disappointed but not surprised to find nothing.

*I am simply too small. It is like trying to see the curvature of the earth from atop a tall tree,* Douman mused as he opened his eyes, still gazing at the sky. He could still see a few stars, although the sky was starting to lighten with the dawn. *But if I could find a mountain to stand atop, I could see it.* But did it actually matter? He was sure his Master was telling him the truth... for a certain value of truth.

Feeling that he had wasted enough time, Douman quickly checked the wards. They were fairly basic, the kind he had to cast when travelling, and acted more like a tripwire than anything, alerting him to intrusions. That was fine when he was in the camp but not really enough when he intended to leave his Master. Frowning, he set out a few of his familiars to act as sentinels. They would be at a serious disadvantage without him, acting as dumb automatons, but they would be able to delay an attacker long enough for Douman to return.

Fishing was the obvious thing to do but he had more time, and a varied diet was extremely important. Humming quietly to himself, Douman ventured into the woods, looking for any spring edibles. Mushrooms would be nice, particularly since he could use a small cantrip to

test them for poison. For a commoner, mushrooms were always a bit dangerous but magic took all the mystery out. Spring onions would be nice too.

It took a bit of time but he found a decent amount of nice little forage. It needed some meat, too, so he went to the river. A small fish would be enough this time. The sun was just rising and his Master was stirring as Douman stirred the mixture in a pot. Ah, it smelled excellent! A shame he couldn't have any but there really hadn't been enough forage for two.

"That smells good Mash..." His Master said groggily, still half asleep and Douman wondered what kind of a name 'mash' was. It sounded like a food dish. "Oh... Douman?" He looked up from the food with a smile as his Master sat up, rubbing her eyes. Her hair was adorably tousled, her hair tie removed and Douman wondered what she would look like if her hair was a beautiful wave, down to her buttocks. He'd always had a fondness for long hair.

"Yes, Master. Breakfast is almost ready." Although it wasn't a very adequate breakfast, to his mind. Breakfast really needed rice to be complete, without rice it just wasn't right. Some pickled vegetables would also be nice. He could have made fake magical ones, of course, but Douman was very wary of that. Because of the false satiety that food brought, it was an excellent way to accidentally starve, particularly when the real food was poor quality. At least they didn't have that problem, the spring fish were nice and fat. Plating the mix, Douman smiled to himself. Except on the very rare occasion that his wife woke before him, he'd always made breakfast in the morning.

"This is incredible!" Mmm, was it? Douman wished he could take more pride in it but his mind went back to the years on the road, all the stupid mistakes along the way that had led to this skill. He liked cooking in a proper house and kitchen better, it didn't have the awful memories attached. "Thank you so much!" Ritsuka's smile was beautiful though and lifted his mood, just a touch.

"You're welcome, Master." *But what are you hiding from me?* Douman pondered it as he settled in by the fire, patiently waiting for Ritsuka to eat. She hadn't told him any falsehoods, no, but some things were conspicuously absent from her story.

The first and most major was the nature of this "Tree of Emptiness." Douman enjoyed puzzles, though, and to him that name had tantalizing hints. It was a common belief that the inside of trees could touch other realms. Emptiness called out to fulfillment... was this tree of emptiness attempting to fill itself? To make a connection to something greater? What would such a mystical tree fill itself with? The obvious answer was mana and the Grail was a great cup of it. Also, a tree had roots. Logically, a mystical tree craving mana would root itself to the leylines of the world. Hmm, this was quite interesting. What was the ultimate purpose of such a tree?

Douman could easily have pressed Ritsuka for answers, but he was strangely disinclined. Perhaps he just liked the puzzle. Perhaps he just wanted to get to know her better. But somehow, he didn't feel the need for more. The answers would come clear in time.

"Douman?" He blinked, rousing from his reverie to see his Ritsuka was finished her meal. Snapping his fingers, he dispelled the temporary china and pushed himself to his feet. A simple glance at the fire and it went dead, the fires snuffed out.

“Yes, Master. Shall we?” Douman offered his arm in a courtly gesture and his Master took it with a smile. Ah, he was looking forward to giving her a more ornate kimono. A beautiful green kimono, delicately embroidered with silver threads, and combs of fine jade... it would be lovely on her!

A bit amused at himself – he’d always had an eye for fashion, he’d enjoyed picking out his mother’s combs as a child – Douman led Ritsuka through the wilderness. It was another long walk but to his pleasure, just before midday they encountered a farm. It was run down and appeared to be abandoned, which was a bit odd but following the path from the farm, they found a road. Douman frowned at the condition of it – it was heavily rutted – but it was still much easier to follow than the surrounding forests.

“This road doesn’t really seem used much. It’s kind of weedy,” Ritsuka said with a troubled air and Douman nodded.

“Hopefully this is merely a disused route. Such things do happen.” Sometimes, the way of trade shifted and it became uneconomical to maintain a road going the wrong way. “Of course, it’s possible the village this road leads to is abandoned. If so, we’ll continue onwards.” Although without the river, he would need to set out snares for rabbits and bait them with magic, or attempt to catch birds. Douman was terrible at catching bigger game... he could kill a deer with a curse, easily enough, but that would also taint the meat. He had no skill whatsoever with a bow.

Fortunately, the village was not abandoned. It was, however, a rather sad little place with nothing to recommend it. To Douman’s jaundiced eye, it was a middling large village that had fallen on hard times. The buildings were weathered by the sun and elements, showing signs of disrepair, and there was an air of hopelessness about the townsfolk. That led to them attracting far too much attention but if anyone stared at them too blatantly, Douman favored them with a hard stare and they found a better place to be.

*This is troublesome, though.* For his next plan of action, he needed someone who was still prosperous. *Hmm.* Did this place have a money lender? That would be perfect. Perhaps they needed the better part of town. Randomly accosting a young woman, Douman asked if the village happened to have a money lender. She pointed him in the right direction, to his pleasure.

“Douman? You’re not planning to knock over the money lender, are you?” Douman barked a surprised laugh at his Master’s question.

“Knock over... I love it!” That was an alien phrase in Heian Japan but his link to the Grail gave him understanding. “No, I have something more subtle in mind, and not necessarily for the money lender.” Anyone who met his qualifications would do. “We need the better part of town, though.” It wasn’t that he objected to taking from the poor, exactly, but there wasn’t much blood to be had from that turnip. The rich were FAR more practical to steal from.

“Oh... I... nevermind.” Ritsuka mumbled and Douman guessed that she had moral qualms about thievery. Well, he’d had qualms about it too before his money had run out in the middle of winter on his second year on the road searching for STUPID FEATHERS FOR A HALF-KITSUNE... no, he should not think about that. Would not!

Pulling himself away from the precipice of an Abe no Seimei induced rage, Douman looked for an easy mark. He found one in a man with rich clothing, hurrying down the street with a peevish expression on his face. Douman murmured a very subtle curse, flicking a single finger, and felt it hit and hold. Reaching into the small pouch he kept tied to his waist, Douman pulled out a few small objects. Hmm, three silver coins. Not entirely what he'd hoped for but it would do. The curse vanished, its purpose fulfilled.

"We should see about having lunch Master... Master?" Douman turned sharply, seeking her aura and presence. To his relief, she wasn't actually that far away... oh, she'd found a lovely little teahouse. But who was that robust woman she was talking to?

Douman had not, in all his life, ever seen a woman warrior. That was simply Not Done. Yet, there could be no doubt that this woman was a wielder of the sword, with very fine metal by her sides. Her clothing was flamboyant yet very well suited to free movement, also making her occupation clear. Really, her garments were very close to indecent, not that Douman cared. Ritsuka was speaking to the woman in an animated manner and Douman watched, fascinated, as his Master gestured towards him and the swordswoman turned to look. Her eyes were a gorgeous cornflower blue. Douman easily sauntered over, feeling that the warrior woman was trying to evaluate him. He returned the favor, noting her strong arms and heavy sword calluses. Quite a contrast to her beautifully displayed chest.

"Do you like what you see, hot stranger?" Her brazen challenge made him grin. Was that the way of things?

"Perhaps, although it might be a little large for my taste. And do you like what you see, batterer of windmills?" He asked mockingly and her eyes narrowed, her hand rattling her sword, just a touch. He allowed his alterations to vanish, just a bit, and examined his right hand, the smoky nails and the curses they carried. Then Ritsuka jumped in.

"Oh, don't fight! We'll pay for lunch, Musashi!" That made her drop her hand from the sword, and a brilliant smile lightened her face. Douman found it fascinating, how open and happy the woman was. It was rare to see anyone wear their feelings so openly on their sleeve.

"Oh, well, in that case you're the best thing I've ever seen! Man oh man, I could go for more dumplings!" Somehow, Douman was sure all the silver he'd just acquired was about to vanish. Well, it was a good cause. Glancing down at his hand, he renewed the spell, seeing his nails fade and shorten.

The tea house was excellent, though, and Douman was pleased to finally taste food again. Fine, velvety dumplings, grilled fish and chicken, pickled vegetables and heaping bowls of rice all graced the table. The tea that accompanied it was also good quality, not as fine as they served at the Emperors' table, but highly acceptable for a small provincial town. For a time there was silence as they all gave homage to excellent cooking.

"Oh wow, this is amazing! I'm almost stuffed!" Musashi said, leaning back in her chair and patting her stomach. It was appreciably rounder than it had been when they started. "Uh... Limbo, I hope you don't mind, but I kind of had a uh, bit of a tab going..." Of course she did. Wait, what had she called him?

“It’s fine, this isn’t really my money anyway. I just pray it’s enough.” It should be, even for a great feast, but he had no idea how big her tab was. “Also, don’t call me that.” Limbo was not a NAME to his mind. It was a concept, and not one that had anything to do with him. Douman had no idea why she had randomly called him such a thing.

“Oh right, Douman! My bad!” What a curious expression. “Hey... you haven’t been stealing, have you?” Her expression was less than happy and she had lowered her voice considerably. “Ritsuka, you wouldn’t do that, would you?” Ritsuka winced and looked away.

“Tch, it’s not thievery, it’s a curse.” Douman said quietly but irritably, keeping an eye out for the waitress. “It operates on karmic justice. It takes more money based on the misdeeds of the cursed, but moderates it according to what they can give, and when the money is lost the bad karma is dispelled.” Honestly, he might be doing the people he was stealing from a favor, although Douman knew his own karma was horrendous. Well, what else could you expect from a magus. Musashi stared at him, her eyes wide and Ritsuka was also looking a bit wide eyed at the description, he noticed.

“...Wow, a curse that does THAT? That’s SO COOL!” No, it wasn’t cold, what was she talking about? “Man, there’s a lot of assholes I would have LOVED to use that on over the years!” Oh yes, Douman had often employed that little spell to punish officious idiots and other morons. The fact that it put a few coins in his pocket had just been the icing on the cake. “Could you teach me?” Eh?

“No, this is a middling range curse, not a mere cantrip.” She could learn a cantrip, Douman thought. Musashi was dazzlingly full of life and in his experience, that meant there was innate ability with magic present. “It would take years of effort to learn such a thing.” Musashi looked downcast at the news.

“Aw, I couldn’t do that.” No. There was a reason that no one, ever, learned both the sword and magic. It just took too long to master both. Douman was actually a bit unusual in having a bit of skill with the martial arts, part of his daily regimen to maintain his body, when he’d been alive. “Hey, do you have enough money for some after dinner drinks?” Musashi asked hopefully and Douman waved over the waitress before putting his money on the table. A quick conversation about Musashi’s tab and it was established that not only could they have drinks, they could have dried fruit and nuts for dessert. “Wow, that’s the best! What do you think, Ritsuka?”

“Oh, Douman is a very good travelling companion. He’s been taking great care of me,” Ritsuka said and Douman shrugged a little, letting the two women chatter. New plates came out to replace the old and were those dried apricots? He LOVED dried apricots, and there were chestnuts as well! Little cups of sake came and Douman warmed his between his hands before taking a sip. Ah, smooth, it was good. To his amusement he saw that Musashi was drinking but Ritsuka was not touching a drop.

“Is my Master too young for alcohol?” Douman teased and was pleased to see Ritsuka’s cheeks flame as she ducked her head. “Have no fear, Master, our lovely sword lady will drink your share.” Musashi laughed, tossing back the sake with the aplomb of a seasoned drunkard.

“Oh, I will! That I will!” It didn’t take too long for them to completely demolish the fruit and nut platter, and finish the last of the rice wine. That truly signalled the end of the meal and Douman handed over the silver before they departed.

“Musashi, could you come with us, please?” Ritsuka’s soft plea caught his attention and Douman looked over sharply, wondering. Why would they need a mortal woman? There was something different about her, but she was still human as far as he could tell. “We really need the help.” Musashi looked down, looking quite guilty to Douman’s eyes.

“I wish I could, I really do... but I’m on a quest.” Oh? “I have to find a magical artifact for um, someone.” That sounded disgustingly familiar. Surely not?

“Did Abe no Seimei have anything to do with this little quest?” Douman asked, aware of the edge to his voice.

“Oh no! But it’s... almost as bad.” Musashi closed her eyes and Douman had the distinct feeling she’d run into Abe no Seimei before. But who was ALMOST as bad as him? Then his Master supplied the answer.

“It’s Merlin then.” Douman realized then that he hadn’t taken Ritsuka’s account of the similarities between Abe no Seimei and Merlin seriously. Was there actually two of them? GAH! Musashi closed her eyes, looking on the miserable side. Well, anyone sent on an errand for those assholes would be miserable. “We know it’s important then. Good luck!” Luck was nice but it could use a little help.

“Hold on a moment.” Douman muttered, seeing a petty government official leaving the teahouse. Another quick curse and he reached into his pouch. To his disappointment, his fingers touched only one object, but when he pulled it out it gleamed gold. “Ah!” That was worth ten silver coins! For a moment he was tempted to keep it but he could always get more and perhaps this would redeem a bit of his own karma. “Take this for the road, lovely wielder of the sword.” He offered it to Musashi with a flourish. Her eyes went wide before she accepted it.

“Thank you so much! I’ve been constantly running out of money, this will be so much help!” Yes, he knew the feeling. He’d invented that particular curse from scratch and it had taken a while to perfect. “You really are a lot nicer than I expected.” Well, that was no surprise, the legends had undoubtedly painted him in the worst of colors. “Don’t let him seduce you too fast Ritsuka! Make him work for it!”

“MUSASHI!” His Master half-shrieked and Douman laughed, deciding that overall, he liked this young woman. They made their goodbye’s and Douman went back to preying on the local population. How many more thefts could he get away with? Well, they were leaving tomorrow so a decent number. He’d have to be careful when he came back, though. Once, a village had accurately identified him as the likely culprit and when he’d come back a year later, immediately run him out of town. Douman hadn’t even been able to blame them, it had been quite smart of the peasants. Hmm, it was best to take only what he needed... enough for a room for the night and some rice for the road. Also, a good map and some tools for divination.

Now that civilization was found, it was time to make a concrete plan for this Grail War.



## Chapter 3

*I really need to make contact with the Shadow Border.*

Ritsuka bit her lip as Douman spread a map over the table and prepared his divination tools. She didn't know how to bring it up – it was opening a can of worms – but she thought what he was doing was completely wrong. Douman was approaching this like an actual Grail War. He wanted to use divinations to trace the leylines and look for a powerful node, as well as other favorable geographic and spiritual features. Then, they could make their way to the location and set up a Territory. Holing up inside a strong Territory, which bent reality in various ways, was the greatest strength of the Caster card.

It made sense, but it wasn't right. Ritsuka knew they were facing far more than individual Servants and Masters. Alter Ego Douman was out there, and more. Facing all of that with a single Servant was going to be a disaster. They NEEDED support. Taking her courage in her hands, Ritsuka spoke up.

“Douman, we need to reach outside the Singularity.” Ritsuka said firmly. He looked up from the map with a frown. “This needs to be our primary goal. The forces defending the Tree of Emptiness will be equivalent to several Servants, working together. You can't win.” His eyes widened before he suddenly scowled.

“Do you underestimate me, Master?” His tone was venomous but Ritsuka met his flat black eyes fearlessly. “I may never have quite reached my rival's heights, but I killed him in the end. I have the power of his spellbook, all the knowledge I mastered. Do not tell me what I can and cannot do!” She'd pricked his pride. Well, Ritsuka knew how to handle this.

“I know you're one of the greatest mages of your time, and the only one to ever get the better of Abe no Seimei.” Flattery worked best when it was true. “But Douman, you have to understand... I wasn't supposed to come into the Singularity by myself. I was supposed to have Mash with me and I should have been able to summon multiple Servants. I should have contact with Sherlock and Da Vinci.” That distracted him a little and Douman tilted his head to the side, taking that preoccupied look he got when he was communing with the Grail. Ritsuka forged onward, sure he was still hearing her. “Someone managed to strip all that from me and force me into the mold of a Grail War.” Almost certainly Limbo, he would enjoy that, but she wasn't going to bring up THAT. “We NEED to get that back.”

“...” Douman tapped his nails against the table as he thought, gazing over the map. “It doesn't matter. The answer is the same. I must set up my Territory.” He said after a moment and Ritsuka stared at him, silently demanding him to explain. “Master, I am unable to even detect this Singularity. I believe that it exists, but I am like a fish in a pond, trying to see the forest around me. It is virtually impossible... unless I can jump out of the pond. I require a mystical boost and setting up a strong enough Territory can provide that.” Then he completely ignored her, picking up his divination tools again. Ritsuka considered arguing – she felt like Douman wasn't taking it seriously enough – but she stopped herself.

*He's right, he'll need the extra power to break out of the Singularity.* It was just annoying to have her concerns disregarded so cavalierly. Ritsuka sighed to herself. Douman definitely had his flaws, but that was to be expected. Hmm.

"I really can't help with this. Do you mind if I go on a walk?" She wanted to see more of the town.

"No, that would be fine. Just take this." Douman said in a preoccupied tone before flicking out one of his little eye cards. Ritsuka took it, noticing that it felt warm and alive in her palm. "If anyone or anything attacks you, toss it in the air. It will do the rest."

"Thank you," Ritsuka said before leaving the room. *He is a fairly typical magus.* Confident to the point of arrogance, vindictive and owning a powerful ego. The only thing that wasn't really typical was his rages. Ritsuka frowned to herself as she walked down the stairs, walking through the desolate common area – there were just a few drunkards present, downing cheap rice wine – and headed outside. *His rages are terrifying.* The way his eyes became completely dark and glowed a little red, the way Douman bared his fangs even when speaking, the way he flexed his nails, as though he wanted to shred something with them... the only thing Ritsuka had seen that came close was Penthesilia when Achilles name came up. But Ashiya Douman was no Berserker and the controlled, venomous, raging *spite* he carried in his heart was frightening.

The sun was just setting and the cool spring air was bracing. Ritsuka felt refreshed as she walked towards the river. The river cut through the centre of town, bridged by a lovely ornamental bridge not that far from where they'd found lodgings. That wooden bridge would be perfect to stand on for a bit and enjoy the late night breezes.

Ritsuka wasn't expecting to find anyone she knew on the bridge but when she spotted the familiar form leaning against the wooden railing, gazing thoughtfully into the water, she was delighted.

"Musashi!" Ritsuka hurried up and Musashi started a little, turning to see her before smiling widely.

"Ritsuka." Musashi's eyes slid past her and she seemed relieved. "Oh, you left him behind at the inn? Is he doing magus things?" Ritsuka nodded with a laugh.

"Yes, very magus things, in ancient Japanese style. I couldn't hope to help." Not only was she a vastly inferior magus to Douman, his style of magic was not really compatible with modern magic. "How are you doing though?" After hearing that Merlin had set Musashi on a quest, Ritsuka was really worried. Merlin's sense of humor was STRANGE. Musashi grinned.

"Well, I'm a lot better than I was before I met you! I won't have to stop and forage or try to rummage up some cash. And it's not really that hard of a quest... I just have to, uh..." She reached into her sash and pulled out a very beautiful card, embossed with gold and flowers, then flicked it open. "Find Taira no Shikiro and ask him for the present he meant to give to his nephew for his sixth birthday." Musashi shrugged a little. "I'm still asking around for this guy. I'll just keep travelling until I find him."

“That’s a really strange errand. What good could a child’s gift be?” Ritsuka wondered, looking up at the sky. Despite the lights of the town, the stars and the moon were very clear and she absently noticed it was a crescent moon.

“I have no idea. Mages do what mages do... but Ritsuka, I’m worried about you. How is this working out?” Musashi came right to the point and Ritsuka hesitated, thinking of how to describe it.

“It’s fine as long as I don’t bring up Abe no Seimei.” Not that Douman looked like he would hurt her or anything, but Ritsuka really didn’t want to make him rage. “I’m a bit worried about what he will think of Limbo,” she admitted, looking down at the river. There were a few ducks there, floating along and ducking their heads in the water as they searched for food. “He knows that history recorded him as the bad guy, but he doesn’t understand how extreme it was.” Musashi turned to look at her, eyes wide in surprise.

“Oh, I thought you were going to be worried they might decide to work together?” No... somehow, Ritsuka couldn’t picture that happening. “You think he’s going to hate it?”

“I think he’s going to really, really hate it.” Which was reassuring, in a way... Ritsuka thought she wouldn’t lose Douman to Limbo... but it was also very worrying because – “I think he might explode,” she admitted and Musashi frowned, a hand dropping to the hilt of her sword. “You haven’t seen it, but he definitely has a temper. He might come a little unglued.” Ritsuka wasn’t sure about that but she could see Douman going into a rant about the unfairness of it all. He definitely wouldn’t like the living evidence of how bad his reputation had gotten. Musashi sighed, looking up at the moon again.

“Well, you’ll just have to rein him in, with a Command Seal if you have to. And that is WAY better than him teaming up with Limbo!” Musashi said with sudden good cheer and Ritsuka had to smile. That was true, it could definitely be worse. “Honestly, it sounds like you’ve got a pretty good Servant to take care of you until I get back! As soon as I get this done I’ll meet up with you, I swear!”

“That would be wonderful,” Ritsuka said warmly. Having Musashi on the team wasn’t QUITE as good as Mash, but it would still make her feel so much better. Then she stifled a yawn with one hand. “Oh... I should be going to bed.” It was getting quite late. Musashi nodded.

“Me too, I need to rise with the dawn, have to make as much time as I can.” They should do that too. “Goodnight, Ritsuka.”

“Goodnight Musashi.” They parted then and Ritsuka walked back to the inn. The common room still had a few drunkards – did they ever go home? – and she went upstairs. Douman was still working on his map, which was liberally decorated with circles, squares and triangles now. He muttered to himself as he adjusted the tools – to Ritsuka, they looked like wires of metal and a few semi-precious stones – and she carefully slipped past him, not wanting to disturb his concentration. Her room had nothing but a simple mattress and a basin for washing up. Stripping away her clothing and changing into a simple shift, Ritsuka settled in with an exhausted sigh.

It had been a long day and a lot of walking and there would be more tomorrow.

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*The next day.*

Douman glanced over his map with a frown, eyeing his final decision with a bit of disfavor. It was not ideal in terms of raw power but other factors made it the favored choice.

“So where are we going?” Ritsuka was bright eyed and bushy tailed, making him feel old in comparison. Still, it was quite nice to see such youthful energy.

“Here.” He lay a finger on the map. “It’s roughly three days worth of travel, maybe four. It’s not ideal in terms of mystical energy, but my divinations determined it’s the location of an abandoned fortification that has a middling ley line nexus beneath it. I can make use of those old fortifications to create my Territory.” Then he tapped a location near the first. “And in this area, there are limestone caves. They are spacious and uninhabited by bats, so I will create an anchor there for an emergency teleport if everything goes wrong.” That had been a large factor in his decision. That and... “While such things are not remotely reliable, my attempts at clairvoyant divinations indicate this is the best of all options.”

“All right! We should get breakfast, stop at a supply store then get going.” Yes, and the supply shop would be nicely on the way out of town, they always were. Douman nodded before rolling up the map and tucking it away into his kimono. He’d put it in a travel bag, when they were properly outfitted.

Breakfast at the inn was simple rice porridge with a bit of salt. They both tucked in and as they ate, Douman thought about his divinations, worrying at them like a rat with a piece of cheese. The divinations weren’t reliable, Clairvoyance was his worst skill (why he’d tried to cheat in his duel with Abe no Seimei) but... still...

*It worries me greatly that the prognostications were uniformly bad.* Douman sipped a bit of his tea before grimacing. Terrible tea, who made this? *Except this one spot.* And the prognostications for this location were not GOOD, exactly, just not disastrous. *This implies that we are heading towards grave danger.* Well, it was a Grail War, what else could he expect. Douman vowed to create the most devastatingly curse ridden Territory to ever exist!

Giving his mind over to planning a vast array of low, medium and high ranked curses, Douman barely paid attention to the food. When his spoon scraped the bottom of the bowl, he was actually surprised. His Master was almost done but had barely touched her tea. Taking another tiny sip, Douman decided that whoever had prepared it had scalded the leaves, which were not good quality to start with. Tch. Even poor quality tea wasn’t awful, if it was prepared right. What a waste of tea leaves.

With good food in their bellies, they departed the inn and headed out of town. The supply shop was in the expected location and Douman purchased a nice, stout travelling bag, a good bag of rice and another bag of dried, salted fish. There was no need for real condiments, the magical ones would do just fine, so that was all they needed for acceptable dishes. And they would be able to stop at one more village in the trip, from what the map told him. They could get some more rice there.

“Master, forgive me, but I can tell you’re not a very advanced magus.” That was putting it kindly. “What is your history? How did you end up in this position?” Ritsuka glanced at him with a pensive expression.

“Well... from the beginning?” Why not? He would like to hear about her childhood. “My mother was a very powerful magus, an Average One.” Douman understood the term but wondered who had come up with it. Pre-eminent One would be more accurate. “But my father’s mage circuits weren’t good at all and I took after him.” An odd choice but he was no one to judge. Douman had no children that he knew of. “Since they knew I wasn’t going to be a real magus, mother taught me... but there was an accident and I lost them.” Ritsuka looked down and Douman felt her painful grief. Then she collected herself. “I didn’t want to stay home after that, so I applied to be a Master at Chaldeas. Because of the way we summoned Servants, personal strength didn’t actually matter, just the Servant compatibility index.” What was that? Douman gave her a questioning glance and Ritsuka quickly explained. “It’s a combination of how easily someone can summon, and how well they can bond to a Servant. I’m not sure how, but they managed to quantify it and I scored really high.”

“Hm. I see. So the mana to support the Servants is supplied elsewhere.” Well, that was only sensible. “I do seem to be drawing strength from somewhere,” Douman mused to himself. He had no mana problems whatsoever, despite the fact that he hadn’t settled into a Territory yet. A great deal of it was just that he hadn’t done much of anything, but not all of it. “And I must say, you do seem to be very good at this Master business.” Ritsuka turned a bit pink at the compliment. “Very few people your age could face me so fearlessly.” And it was not just bravado. Ritsuka was genuinely not intimidated by him, which was impressive for such a youngster.

“Uh, thank you! You’re not that bad though.” Compared to what? Douman chuckled at the thought. Were there really so many Servants equally fell – “No, seriously, the problem is the Berserkers.” Oh. Of course. “There are a lot of them who don’t just yell all the time, but they’re... crazy. They usually have a twisted logic system that you can’t really reason with, you just have to work around it.” Ritsuka sounded faintly exasperated and Douman did know what she meant. Some elementals were like that. “And well, it’s a long story but I’ve been through a lot.” Oh? “Maybe I can tell you about that later though... Douman, can I ask you something um, kind of personal?” Mmm hmm? Douman gave his Master a slow, seductive smile and saw her cheeks go red. Ah, that was such a lovely look on her! “Not like that! I mean, the myth is so wrong... uh... it says that you seduced Abe no Seimei’s wife?” ...Ah. “How did that happen?” That was quite a loaded question and Douman pondered what to say as they walked. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to!”

“Mmm, I don’t mind speaking about it.” Douman said slowly as he gazed over the spring foliage. Tiny wildflowers brightened the path and he spotted a camellia, just beginning to put forth red blooms. Oddly appropriate. Douman tapped his nails together for a moment before coming to a decision. “Master, I wish to make it clear. I am not making any excuses for my actions, or justifying them in any way. This is simply what happened from my perspective.” What he was going to say would paint him and his wife in a more sympathetic light, but it did not change the truth of what they had done. Their actions had been, by any standards, completely reprehensible.

“I understand... what happened?” Ritsuka’s voice was soft and Douman sighed and explained, his mind travelling into the past...

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*Ashiya Douman knew everything about Abe no Seimei.*

*In his quest to utterly destroy the arrogant half-kitsune, Douman had become a student in all the ways of Abe no Seimei. He knew what meals the man preferred, the teahouse he preferred to visit, the usual schedule of his life. And the courtesans he liked to visit.*

*Abe no Seimei was a natural philanderer. Flirtatious and boyishly handsome, he seduced women easily as breathing. Douman had much the same charm, but in a very different way. And curiously enough, they both had the same problem retaining women. Abe no Seimei’s fickle nature drove them away, while Douman’s dark heart did the same.*

*Abe no Seimei was married, though. He’d selected his bride solely for her magic, as a good wizard should, and as a husband he was attentive enough. He’d never once given up his womanizing ways but she didn’t seem to care as long as he gave her adequate attention, flirting and gifts. Abe no Seimei doted on his firstborn son and taught him the ways of magic.*

*Over the years, though, the cracks began to show. Abe no Seimei had precious little interest in his second born son or his daughter. As age and child rearing took a toll on his wife’s appearance, he spent more time with the court beauties. But then, the courtesans didn’t expect much except a bit of flattery, jewelry and gold. So much less work than what a wife required. Douman observed that once in a while, Abe no Seimei would suddenly seem to right his ways, spend more time with his wife and family... but then quickly go back to his usual habits.*

*With his long experience with women, Douman was reasonably sure that Abe no Seimei’s wife was becoming very frustrated. The kitsune’s lackluster attempts at pretending to a family man were in response to an argument. That meant there was an opening, if only he could find a way to exploit it.*

*His first salvo came when he happened to meet her in the Royal gardens. Douman thought she was beautiful, wearing her full formal kimono, her hair done in the most current style and held in place with fine combs of red jade. They were so bright against her black hair, which was shot just a touch with grey.*

*Douman made no secret of his footsteps and she turned, frowning slightly as she saw him, a touch of wariness in her dark eyes. That was to be expected, she was a faithful wife. Douman smiled and held out a single, blood red flower.*

*“Please, may I add this to your hair? I believe it would look wonderful on you.” He could see a perfect spot for it to go. Her frown lightened into a small, wry smile.*

*“Your motives are suspect. But you may.” Douman gently worked it into her braids, settling it just above one of her combs. His nails gently brushed her skin, causing her to exhale softly.*

*“It looks beautiful on you. You should always wear red,” Douman murmured, reflecting that it was true. Red was a beautiful color on her. She reached up to gently touch the flower before smiling at him.*

*“Flatterer. But I do enjoy this. Thank you.” Their eyes met and Douman could see a kind of melancholy in her, an ache for something she did not have. A need he could fill.*

*It progressed from there. A small gift here. A kind word there. Gradually, it turned into clandestine meetings and finally, even more. And through it all, Abe no Seimei noticed nothing. He was just glad that his nagging wife was leaving alone and it never once crossed his mind that she might have betrayed him. Ah, the arrogance of the man, to take her completely for granted!*

*Douman wasn't entirely sure how to move her to the final step. He needed access to Abe no Seimei's spellbook. The man's kitsune blood was the source of his vast mystical power, but the book harnessed it. With the book, Douman could achieve a mastery of curses beyond his dreams. Magic in general, of course, but curses were what he excelled at beyond all other things.*

*Then the matter was taken entirely out of his hands.*

*“I have something for you.” And she offered him a book. Douman stared, feeling the magical potency locked within the pages, seeing the ancient but still beautiful vellum. He reached out, feeling like he was in a dream, and touched the cover, feeling a tingle in his nails. Yes, it was real but...*

*“Do you understand what this will mean?” Douman had to ask, meeting her eyes. They were full of resolve and she gave him a firm nod.*

*“I do.” Douman could only nod in return and accept the book. As he did, though, he realized that this sealed a feeling that had been budding in him for some time... he was in love with this woman. And she was in love with him and together, they both wanted Abe no Seimei dead. And for a moment, he exulted.*

*Finally, revenge was within his grasp!*

## Chapter 4

For a while, they walked in silence and Douman thought about the past. He really didn't want to discuss this with his Master – it had been soul searing – but his mind couldn't help but go to how everything had ended.

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*Douman frowned as he examined the wares at the apothecary. He needed some ingredients for curses. Not for himself, but for his step-son, Abe no Seimei's second son. The boy had an aptitude for curses and Douman had decided to train him, despite the possible danger. (he really didn't think it was likely the boy would stab him in the back someday, but you never knew)*

*"Poor quality," Douman muttered to himself as he eyed the dried herbs. It really did matter, it could cause the curse to fail and he didn't want the boy to get discouraged. Sorting through the bundles, he found one that seemed a bit better than the others. Yes, it would do.*

*"You are Ashiya Douman?" Eh? Douman looked up to see a complete stranger. But he immediately went on guard, sensing another magus, and a powerful one. That was deeply concerning, he knew every wizard in the Emperors court. The kimono of rich blue the stranger was wearing was very expensive and from the hat he was wearing, he was a foreign priest. "I was wondering if you had seen Abe no Seimei lately?"*

*"Eh? No, he's dead," Douman said irritably, wondering if this man had travelled far for an audience with Abe no Seimei. Sometimes, news did not spread well at all. "He's been dead for six years." Ignoring the man again, he picked up a jar of pickled radishes. They were just food but he fancied them.*

*"Really? I saw him just this morning." Douman's head snapped towards the stranger and he opened his mouth to call the man an idiot, but then saw his not well concealed smirk. And a spike of fear pierced his heart.*

*"What have you done?" Douman demanded and the fear deepened as the man continued to smirk. It was absurd, impossible, but if Abe no Seimei had somehow returned then – "ANE!" The jar of radishes shattered as Douman bolted out of the store. He had to get home right now!*

*When he arrived, out of breath, Douman knew he was already too late. He could hear his step-daughter crying... bursting through the door he beheld a horrific scene. His step-son was asleep on the floor, a magical slumber (he'd tried to defend his mother, Douman was sure) and his step-daughter was cowering in the corner, weeping quietly. Abe no Seimei had his wife with a knife at her throat and Douman met her eyes, seeing she was terrified but trying to maintain her composure.*

*"Let her go. I am the one who ended you!" Douman demanded, knowing he had no real power here. His worst curse couldn't possibly kill Abe no Seimei before he cut Ane's throat. (or kill him at all, actually)*



*“But she is the one who betrayed me.” For the first time, the half-kitsune asshole sounded like he was taking things completely seriously. Douman would have been pleased with that before – one of the MANY things about Abe no Seimei that had driven him to madness had been the way he NEVER seemed to take Douman seriously – but now it just fueled his fear. “However, I will offer you a choice.” Abe no Seimei kicked something towards him and Douman saw it was a small knife, in a fine sheath of blue leather. “End your own life and I will allow her to return to her family.”*

*“Douman, no!” Ane gasped but Douman ignored her, picking up the knife. He unsheathed it and regarded the blade for a moment, noting the minor imperfections of the blade, a burr that needed to be filed out. Only a decent quality knife, but it would do the job. He looked up to meet Ane’s eyes.*

*“I love you.” He said softly before plunging the knife into his chest, directly into the heart. It hurt, ah, and when he pulled it out there was a massive gush of blood... Douman immediately felt faint, dropping the blade and reaching out for the wall to steady himself, then slip down to the floor... he heard Ane’s anguished cry then felt hands on his face, but the world was going out of focus. Ah, that was Ane.... In his final moments, Douman smiled.*

*He regretted nothing at all.*

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Douman sighed to himself as he pulled his mind out of the past. Ah, it was strange that the one thing he did NOT hate Abe no Seimei for had been that moment. At least he hadn’t come home to see Ane dead on the floor. Knowing that she had lived, if in exile to her family... that was enough. Then his Master suddenly made a choking sound and he glanced at her questioningly.

“Just thinking that family dinners must have been awkward.” HAH!

“They were, a touch. I had to send the oldest son away to complete his training.” The boy had hated him, understandably so. Douman had known there would be very difficult confrontations in the future but there had been no help for it. “Fortunately, the younger children were less attached to their father.” Still quite ambivalent about the situation, though. “I won the younger boy over when I started training him.” Apparently he’d desperately wanted that and Abe no Seimei had been ignoring him, favoring the older child. That was good sense for a magus family... a younger sibling was a threat to the elder, with a mage crest to fight over... but Douman didn’t care about his own legacy, let alone his arch enemies’. “It took much longer to win over the girl, but she eventually accepted the situation.” Seeing that her mother was finally happy had helped immensely. “I really didn’t look forward to when the oldest boy completed his training and came to kill me, but it never came to that.” It would have been damned difficult, though, fighting another wizard who had full intent to kill when Douman COULD NOT kill him. Ane would have had a fit. Ritsuka murmured something and Douman only caught the phrase “magus families”. Well, he couldn’t disagree.

They walked in silence for a time, Ritsuka taking an occasional drink from her flask of water. Douman kept an eye out for any sign of game, but saw nothing. The spring growth was lush, though, so there were hopefully rabbits about.

As the day wore on, though, Douman began noticing something. A strange feeling that he was being watched. That could be due to a poor scrying attempt from another magus, but Douman could detect nothing. Tapping his nails together, Douman frowned. A scrying attempt competent enough to be undetectable when he was actively looking for it should also not give him this feeling of being watched. Was he just imagining things?

It kept coming and going, though, all through the day. For hours he wouldn't feel it, then there would suddenly be feeling of eyes on his back. Every time, Douman silently checked but found nothing. The sporadic nature of it led him to an unpleasant conclusion.

*Master, I believe we are being observed by another magus.* Douman employed their connection to communicate silently for the first time. Ritsuka glanced at him and he noticed she wasn't very surprised. *It's well done but must be fundamentally flawed in some way.* He couldn't imagine how though. Was the other magus using bad tools, perhaps? A tool with a deeply hidden flaw, something the other mage hadn't noticed? Douman tapped a nail against his cheek thoughtfully. It was so unlikely though!

*What do you mean?* Ritsuka asked and Douman explained the odd sensation of being watched. *You're sure you're not imagining it?* He wasn't bothered by the question, it was his first thought too.

*Not at this point. The way it comes and goes is typical of someone checking up on us to see what we're up to.* Watching someone every minute of the day was boring and tedious. Despite his obsession with the man, Douman had never gone that far with Abe no Seimei. *I'm only a bit baffled about what flaw in the scrying is making it perceptible to me.* So very odd.

*Well, we'll just have to discuss anything important like this!* Indeed. Hmm, the culprit was probably a Master in the Grail War. Given that this was his time period, perhaps it was someone he knew. *Is there anything you can do to block it though?* Hmm.

*It's very troublesome. If I could find the person scrying us, I would give them quite a nasty little taste of my power.* He had specific curses for just that situation. *But since I can't, I can only cast general obfuscations which are unlikely to be successful if the scrying is as high quality as I believe. Still, it's worth trying.* Perhaps whoever was scrying them was in fact amateurish, but using an artifact or even a Servant ability to hide their presence. It was unlikely, but unlikely things did happen. *I will cast them tomorrow morning.* It would require a ritual and binding the spell to an object they could carry with them as they went.

*That should be perfect. Thank you Douman,* she said before glancing at him with a smile, her brown eyes warm. Her bright red hair fluttered in the breeze and he marveled for a moment at how beautiful it was. That moved his thoughts in a very different direction and as they travelled, Douman considered another interesting problem.

*Should I attempt to seduce her?* That was, to his mind, an interesting question. Douman had always been very fond of women and had had many lovers over the years. His good looks at his air of sensual darkness had made it easy to bed women, although keeping them had been a problem. However, there were reasons he should and shouldn't attempt it.

For the reasons he shouldn't, Douman thought there was a good chance he would not succeed. Ritsuka found him attractive, he could see that, but she was experienced in handling Servants and surely he was not the first pretty thing to cross her path. Douman did not particularly like rejection – who did? – so perhaps it was unwise. Another reason he shouldn't was the danger that genuine feelings might develop between them. Douman's existence was tied to the Grail of this Singularity. When it went, so would he and even if Ritsuka summoned him again he would have lost all memories of their prior interactions. That would primarily affect Ritsuka, but Douman also strongly disliked the idea.

As for the reasons he SHOULD, there was only a limited amount of time at his disposal. Why should he not enjoy himself? Why should she not, when there was a good possibility they could both die? Also, sex would deepen their mystical connection and if he used certain rituals, the power generated could be amplified. That could be very valuable.

After a great bit of pondering, Douman reluctantly decided that he should not attempt to seduce Ritsuka. The unfortunate truth was, he was not a casual person in his affections. He really did not want to develop an emotional connection that could lead to nothing, even if he would not be able to remember it.

*If I were younger, I would do it in a heartbeat,* Douman thought to himself with a smile. But that had been before he'd started wanting to settle down. Ah, how things changed as you got older.

That night, as they made camp, Douman felt the invisible eyes on his back just as he was preparing supper. Suddenly irritated beyond endurance, he whipped his head around and purely on instinct, glared into the air. There was a feeling of surprise and the watching suddenly vanished.

“...Ooops.” Douman internally cursed himself. Now the person doing the scrying would know they had a flaw in the spell! That was NOT ideal. Why did he have to have such a volcanic temper? Well, it couldn't be helped and Douman would not regret it. A fit of temper as young man had led to a wizard sensing his potential and taking him as an apprentice. If it hadn't been for that he'd likely have lived and died in his home village, after a life of hard labor as a cheap farmhand.

“Master, do you know how to make snares?” Douman asked, making conversation as the rice cooked.

“Yes actually, I've done that many times.” Oh, excellent! “Would you like me to put some out for you, then you can enchant them later?” Ritsuka asked, bright eyed and eager to help.

“Please, that would save me some work and this rice won't be done for a while.” She could easily get it done while he kept watch over things. And the lures he would put on the snares

did not require that he be the one to make them. Sorting through their bag, Ritsuka found the twine he'd bought and went out to take care of it as Douman tended the food.

Overall, he thought their journey was off to a fine start.

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Author's note: Short chapter, but I HAVE to go back to farming. :D Not much time left!

## Chapter 5

Douman walked through his Territory, examining the curses and hexes and feeling moderately pleased.

The trip to the abandoned fort had been uneventful. The ruins had included the remains of a small settlement, so he'd plenty of material to construct a kind of labyrinth. Nothing too elaborate, it would be easy enough for an intruder to figure out, but that wasn't the point. The point was the layers and layers of curses any enemy would have to penetrate to finally reach the inner sanctum.

*A bit of a grandiose term for our living quarters*, Douman thought wryly. The heart of the labyrinth was the inner portion of the fort, completely rebuilt. Lovely bedrooms, comfortable with tatami mats, a very acceptable kitchen and a spacious workroom for his rituals. As well as a few pieces of art, faithful reproductions of some of the Emperors finest silk paintings, to make the place a bit more elegant. Still, it was more comfortable and charming than intimidating.

The only thing that kept the Territory from being a true success was the strength of the ley line nexus. It was, to Douman's mind, just not good enough. He was trying to fix that, attempting to divert the ley lines to strengthen the nexus, but that was the kind of thing that normally took years. He just didn't have the time.

*And my Master is becoming impatient*. Ritsuka was being tactful about it, just giving him gentle reminders, but Douman knew she urgently wanted him to reach outside the Singularity. He tapped his nails together as he thought about it. Perhaps he should attempt it soon, provided he could do it without wasting too much mana if it was a failure. Should he perhaps suggest they raise mana... but Douman strongly disliked the thought. To his mind, having sex for purely practical purposes should be reserved for a truly desperate situation.

*Douman? Should we start supper soon?* Ah, yes, they should and he was quite looking forward to it.

*Certainly, please meet me in the kitchen*, Douman replied, going towards the kitchen himself. Ritsuka was going to teach him how to make a Japanese curry. It had been a bit of a pain to procure and create the correct spices, but they had a mixture that seemed adequate. Douman could already tell it would be like nothing he'd tried before and that was very interesting.

For the curry, he'd procured a nice little bird, a duck that would have been destined for a noble's table. With the enhanced mana of the ley line nexus, Douman was outright thieving, but in very careful ways. He would take a bit of rice directly from the supplier, where the pilfering was unlikely to be noticed or cause anyone difficulties. A single fish direct from the catch. A duck that had been shot in a noble's hunt and hadn't even been counted yet, let alone aged. That sort of thing... Douman knew, quite well, how an accusation of thievery could destroy a peasant's life. His karma was bad enough, he wouldn't add to it if he could avoid it.

*This really isn't how I would prefer to live my life.* Douman sighed to himself as Ritsuka began to instruct him on the ways of curry, starting with browning the onions. A wizard of his caliber would normally serve the Emperor and be completely supported in all ways. Or, if he was somehow out of favor, a powerful noble. A lesser wizard would set up shop in a town and sell all manner of nostrums, talismans and potions. Douman could have done that, but the only settlement remotely close to this fort was a small farming village and it was a day away. It just wasn't practical.

They had started the curry early because the spices needed time to simmer. Douman occasionally stirred it, hoping those would work out. Oddly enough, he'd known many of the ingredients but only in terms of their use in magecraft. It had never occurred to him to EAT them. But then, the real ones were too expensive for such a use, unlike his fakes.

As it turned out, though, they were absolutely delicious. The curry was a wonderful success, the duck falling off the bone and filling the curry with savory meat, and the curry itself was a wonderfully complicated flavor, spicy and sour and just a touch sweet. They ate together in the very cozy little dining room. It reminded Douman of his home with his mother, so very long ago.

"Master, perhaps we should share stories. Would you like to hear about one of my adventures?" Douman asked, reflecting that he hadn't enjoyed "adventuring" at all. He was definitely a magus to the core, most comfortable in his workroom researching new curses. Still, the travels he'd been forced into made excellent stories. Ritsuka swallowed a mouthful of curry and rice before answering.

"Sure, if you want to talk about it." He did rather. So Douman told her the rather amusing story of how he'd used all his familiars to pick cherries for three days, to satisfy an elemental who simply couldn't cope with the thought of the fruit going to waste. And how he'd almost thrown all the fruit in the river when it turned out the damned thing had been lying the whole time about knowing where he should go for the damned feathers. Ritsuka was laughing by the end of it and Douman was quite pleased, although at the time he'd been ready to commit murder.

"Let me tell you about Drake and Blackbeard!" Then Ritsuka was regaling him with a story of the exploits of amoral, drunken pirates. With her trying to be the voice of reason and head off disaster, unsuccessfully. Douman was sure it had been as frustrating as his own experience, at the time, but in retrospect the spiral into absolute chaos was extremely amusing.

After supper, Douman used his familiars and a bit of actual work to clean off everything and get the kitchen spotless. He was very much a fanatic about cleanliness and always had been. Then, as Ritsuka read a book of beginning magecraft he'd procured for her – her mage circuits might be weak, but there was no reason to let them molder – Douman went to examine the defenses. He did this every day, sometimes multiple times a day, correcting any minor issues and coming up with new and varied ways to kill intruders. In particular, Douman wanted to make sure that no clever Assassin could make it through his wards. There was no way for him to penetrate very high Presence Concealment, but if even a single curse was tripped he would know instantly.

That was why the soft cough behind him came as such a nasty shock.

Douman whirled with lightning speed, then froze in pure shock as he looked into a face identical to his own. It was utterly surreal, seeing himself grin... did he actually look like that? And what was even happening?

“Hello, ‘me’.”

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Over his life, Douman had come to terms with the fact that his temper was absolutely horrendous.

It was simply a fact. Hatred and rage came easily to him, filling his heart in a raging torrent of spite. As a young man he’d exploded easily but over time, he’d learned to control it. That didn’t lessen the emotions behind it and Douman could carry grudges forever. Explosive rages, enduring grudges... oh, his temper was very bad. Still, it usually took a solid affront to rouse his ire. He’d never hated someone on first sight in his life.

Until now. Douman began to tremble as his mind worked and he began to comprehend the situation. With comprehension came a budding rage that felt absolutely frightening, even just starting. He could tell this other Servant was an Alter-Ego. That meant...

“Nothing to say, ‘me’? Has the cat got your tongue?” The words of his other self dripped with malice and mockery. It was so familiar yet so wrong, like a parody of his method of speaking. Everything about this... this *thing* was a parody. The hair in particular caught his notice. His court style, those tight ringlets, but why had he put BELLS on them? And what was this costume? It was nothing he would wear! “I never imagined I would be so mute! How bizarre!” *I will only speak to utter a curse.* Douman’s rage was robbing his voice and he knew it had to be reflecting on his face, making his eyes glow red. Abe no Seimei would have been quietly casting a few spells to make sure the court didn’t get damaged, if he saw Douman like this. How could his Alter-Ego self not understand?! “Well, it seems I will have to do all the work.” The creature actually sounded *exasperated*.

*Douman? What is happening?* Ritsuka sounded afraid. Douman immediately walled her off completely from his mind... he would deal with her *later*. For now, his rage had only one target.

“We both know what you want more than anything... Abe no Seimei, humbled at your feet. I can give that to you.” Douman wanted to scream at him. *You don’t understand anything!* But he still couldn’t speak. The rage was like a forest fire, engulfing his mind. And beneath it something else was rising, the thing he’d kept to himself, the curse the Grail had chosen to anoint as his *Noble Phantasm*. “All you have to do is stab that pretty little Master of yours in the back. What do you say?” The purring, seductive tone of his own voice in this situation was the final spark, igniting a sheer *loathing* that was utterly bottomless.

***Die. Slowly.*** What came up in his mind was not *words* but something closer to a Primordial Rune. His Alter Ego self had just a moment of awareness, enough time to be taken aback and realize he’d made a mistake before red light flared from the floor, from lines on Douman’s body, from the very air as the curse beat through the air like a living thing.

(Douman couldn't know, but for a moment, the pupils of his eyes became red skulls)

Only Abe no Seimei MIGHT have been able to block the curse. His Alter Ego self had no hope and he screamed, a very satisfying sound as the rune was inscribed directly onto his mana core. Douman watched in pure exultation as the Alter Ego's face twisted in agony, his hands gripping his chest as he staggered.

"You... how... gah... AGH!" Then the Alter Ego vanished, teleporting away. Not surprising, Douman knew he'd have had exactly that kind of plan in place in case things went wrong. A shame for HIM that the Alter Ego hadn't realized he needed it until it was too late. Douman breathed heavily, feeling the rage briefly receding... before flaring back with a vengeance.

"Ritsuka," Douman growled, flexing his fingers, the long nails with the curses they contained. For a moment he was tempted to go find his Master and give her a good piece of his mind, but then sanity intruded. He was in no fit state to tell his Master what an *incredible idiot* she was. Douman needed to calm down. Keeping himself walled off from his Master – she would be worried but that was too bad – Douman stalked out of the fortress and found a good spot outside. Then he summoned up a training dummy, the kind young men used to learn the ways of the sword, and proceeded to beat the hell out of it with his fists. Douman reduced it to nothing but shards of straw and wood, but it wasn't enough. He needed more.

Five training dummies' later, Douman had managed to work out his rage. Wiping a bit of sweat from his brow, Douman breathed heavily and then blinked as he heard a soft sound behind him. Turning he saw Ritsuka there, looking quietly terrified but also facing him bravely. *How long was she watching?* Douman was... not particularly pleased, that she had seen that fit of temper. Still, that was the least of his concerns at the moment.

"Master, I know you are not much of a magus. However, surely the problems that *identical twins* pose to magecraft are not unknown to you." Douman's tone was absolutely venomous and from the confused look on Ritsuka's face, she might not know. "If they are, let me enlighten you. Identical twins can register as the *same person* to wards and spells." Ritsuka's expression was turning to one of horror and she raised a hand, placing it over her mouth. "The stories of identical twins warring over a mage crest are legendary and normally result in mutual destruction." Perhaps those stories had been lost with time. "Because of that, no magus family will normally train both twins. They are ALWAYS separated at birth and one is fostered to a normal family." He was getting off topic. "You let me cast my wards in complete ignorance of this problem. If that cursed doppelganger had had more sense, he would have just stabbed you in the heart and been done with it!" Why hadn't he? The sheer amusement of convincing the Servant to betray the Master, or more than that?

"I'm sorry. I didn't know, I really didn't..." Ritsuka's voice was tiny and Douman could sense her sincerity, as he let the connection between them relax. Sighing, he reached up to rub his forehead. How utterly exasperating.

"If you were my apprentice, I would work you to exhaustion. As it is, I can only accept your apology... but I will need to rework all of my curses to account for this." What an absolutely dreadful opening in his defenses, but it could be fixed. Thank heaven's his other self was an Alter Ego, that one small difference would be enough. Actual identical twins had to resort to other measures. "While I do that, prepare tea and get ready to tell me *everything* you have left



out.” The time for secrets was past. Ritsuka nodded, suitably cowed, and went back into the fortress. Douman rubbed his forehead before gazing at the wreckage he’d created. Flicking a finger, he dispelled the remains of straw and wood and went inside to rework the wards.

This day had been unfortunate, but it could have been worse. Now that his temper was calmed, Douman would make the best of it.

Author’s Note: A chapter written during the maintenance I had NO IDEA was coming! sigh

## Chapter 6

Ritsuka sniffed quietly as she prepared the tea, feeling absolutely horrible.

*I didn't know. I just didn't know.* She'd never thought that keeping Douman ignorant of Limbo would mean the Alter-Ego could just *walk in. I need Da Vinci and Sherlock.* THEY would have known, would have warned her that she had to alert Douman. But it was still her fault, she should have trusted him earlier. It was just so hard, trying to explain everything that had happened to a Servant who still thought this was a Grail War...

The tea was done when Douman came back. To Ritsuka's relief, he was perfectly composed if a little tired. Well, he'd... spent a lot of energy today. (Ritsuka tried not to think about the way he'd beaten the training dummies apart. It really had reminded her of Penthesilea in an Achilles induced rage) Douman took a seat on the tatami mat as Ritsuka served the tea for them both.

"Thank you," Douman murmured before taking a sip. "Ah, excellent. You make fine tea, Master." He'd definitely calmed down, what a relief.

"Thank you... I... Douman, I'm so sorry. I just didn't know how to tell you," Ritsuka said miserably, still feeling incredibly guilty. Douman sighed before waving a hand.

"Nevermind. I have already accepted your apology, nothing more needs to be said." Even in her misery, that caught her attention and made Ritsuka wonder. If Douman intended to carry a grudge, would he just not accept an apology? "However, you must tell me everything now." Oh right.

"This will take a while." Ritsuka warned before going into the full story. Douman listened patiently, sipping his tea as she quickly ran through the events that had made her the only surviving Master, the Singularities, Solomon, then the Lost Belts. When she reached the Lost Belts, Douman's expression changed, becoming odd and preoccupied. "Douman?" He blinked, focusing on her again.

"I was still hearing you, Master. Please, continue." Well, if he said so. Ritsuka continued the story, and in particular spent time describing Limbo. Douman hated it, she knew he did, but it was better to let him know everything now, when he seemed to have completely spent his rage. When she finally ran out of words, Douman spoke. "Ritsuka, have you ever had the feeling, when someone was telling you something, that you knew it already but had simply forgotten?"

"Not often but sometimes..." Ritsuka said uncertainly, not sure where he was going. Douman frowned, setting his teacup on the table.

"I felt that way for the entire last part of your story and now I am certain I know why. Spontaneous summoning into a Grail War do not happen... but the one force that can spontaneously summon Servants is the Counter Force." Oh! Was that what had happened? But then why – "For some reason, the Counter Force was blocked from direct summoning

into this Singularity. Probably my Alter Ego's work. But it managed to grab a single card from the Grail and when you arrived, it made use of it." Douman poured himself a bit more tea before taking a sip. "Because of the two forces at work, I had more knowledge than a Grail summoned Servant should, but less than a true agent of the Counter Force."

"I see..." Ritsuka wished, again, that Sherlock and Da Vinci were in contact. They would have figured that out ages ago! "I wonder why it summoned you though." Ritsuka murmured, then winced a little as Douman looked amused. "Not that I think you're not fit for the job!" She quickly said and the magus laughed.

"Ah, Master, I am not the least bit offended. Mmm... this is Heian Japan. The Counter Force does best when it summons Servants directly from the time period affected, and we have many powerful wizards, so that part is logical." That was true, the Counter Force had more limitations than the Grail. "It would have been equally fitting for you to summon Abe no Seimei, of course, but there are two reasons for that to not be the case." Oh? Ritsuka gave him a questioning look and Douman smiled. "Do you remember what you said to me, when I asked why I should help you in the Grail War?"

"Um..." What had it been? Ritsuka had to think hard but then it came back. "Because it was the right thing to do." Douman's smile widened, becoming a shark like grin.

"What an absurd thing to say to a magus! But what an even more absurd thing to say to a creature like Abe no Seimei!" Douman laughed, a deep, amused sound before taking a deep drink of his tea. "Oh, he was charming, he could make people around him dance to his tune, but I don't think the half-kitsune bastard *liked* people at all." Ritsuka stared, feeling a sense of unreality. "He liked the *idea* of humanity, in a vague sort of way, but the people themselves? HAH! To expect that bastard to do the right thing would be like expecting water to run uphill! History may have recorded me as the epitome of wickedness but I assure you, I am far more likely to *do the right thing*."

"Are you sure you've never met Merlin?" Ritsuka asked, feeling a little dazed. Douman lifted an eyebrow at her and Ritsuka explained. "That's exactly what he said about himself!" That he liked the idea of humanity, but not humans.

"Ah, did he? Then you've just told me how Merlin differs from Abe no Seimei. Seimei would never have said that about himself and if he heard me say it, I'm certain he would vehemently disagree." Douman sipped his tea, his eyes a bit vague. Ritsuka thought he was remembering the past. "Despite his ability to manipulate, he had a certain blindness about the nature of others and his own nature as well. Despite their similarities, it sounds like this Merlin creature has a great deal more wisdom." Yes. Ritsuka couldn't imagine Merlin making an enemy of Douman the way Abe no Seimei had. But then, Merlin just wouldn't find that kind of feud amusing. Maybe Abe no Seimei enjoyed it? "I sometimes wonder... the only thing I was able to find out about his childhood was that his kitsune mother abandoned him quite young. Perhaps that has something to do with his blindness to his own flaws." For a moment, Ritsuka was tempted to ask Douman what HIS greatest flaw was, but they both knew the answer. *His rage*.

"What is the other reason?" Douman had mentioned two reasons why she wouldn't summon Abe no Seimei. He sipped his tea for a moment, his eyes blank and non-revealing, before

setting the teacup on the table and tapping it with his nails.

“This may only be my hate and distrust speaking. Do not take it too seriously, Master,” Douman said and Ritsuka frowned. “When I said that Abe no Seimei did not have the decency to stay dead, I was not joking. Perhaps because of his half-kitsune ancestry, he seemed to find age and mortality repugnant. If there is anyone on this world who could find a way to cheat true death, it would be Abe no Seimei.” Ritsuka felt a chill at the thought. That would mean... “And if he is still alive, he cannot be summoned.”

“I see.” That might not be true – the Incineration of Humanity was a loophole – but depending on how Abe no Seimei had achieved immortality it might be true. Ritsuka gave Douman a curious look. “You never wanted immortality?” Douman chuckled and shook his head.

“No. I always found a certain kind of beauty in the impermanence of life, a grace in the process of aging. Seeing my wife’s grey hairs, the small lines when she smiled... it pleased me.” Ritsuka swallowed, feeling deeply struck by that vision. “Well Master, to bring us back on topic, I agree that it is absolutely imperative to reach outside this Singularity.” Oh good! “At least we won’t have to worry about that Alter Ego creature much longer.” ...Huh?

“What do you mean?” Ritsuka asked, feeling a bit of trepidation. What exactly had he DONE to Limbo? Ashiya Douman frowned, before pushing his empty teacup away and tapping his nails on the table in front of him.

“I used my Noble Phantasm, at the very peak of its force,” he said and Ritsuka stared at him, wondering why he seemed... uncomfortable? “I do not like my Noble Phantasm very much, Master. It is extremely unreliable.” Unreliable? “It is a curse I learned from Abe no Seimei’s book... I never cast it in life, not once. But I learned it, and I even worked to perfect it, making it more insidious and deadly. But I had no reason to use it.” Douman paused a moment, his eyes vague, then shook his head. “As a Noble Phantasm, it’s not the same... perhaps as a consequence of my legend, or just my true nature, the curse is linked to my emotional state. If I cast it when completely calm, it’s just a potent death curse. It ranks up as I become more enraged... at the highest level, it is similar to a Primordial Rune. It is irreversibly lethal and impossible to dispel, changing its nature constantly, tainting everything it touches. That mockery of a copy will be dead in three days, at the most.” Douman’s tone was darkly satisfied. Ritsuka, though, heard a warning bell.

“But you can dispel it, can’t you?” Ritsuka asked and Douman frowned.

“Of course I can – oh.” Douman stopped dead, just staring ahead for a moment and Ritsuka was relieved. She didn’t want to tread on his ego by pointing out what he’d missed. “You are absolutely right, Master.” Although the way he gave her his full attention was also alarming. “The creature will probably waste at least a day trying to dispel it, but then he will come for us, with all the force at his disposal.” Yes, that was what Limbo HAD to do. “Should we leave the Territory?” He was asking HER? But then, Ritsuka was the Master and that came with responsibility.

“I don’t know. Can you hide us from Limbo on the road?” Ritsuka asked hopefully. If he could do that, maybe they could keep Limbo searching until it was too late. Douman thought

about it for a long moment and Ritsuka could practically see him rifling through his mental folder of spells, considering how to modify them.

“I really don’t know. Perhaps, perhaps not.” Douman finally said and Ritsuka sighed internally. It would be an answer like that. “It depends on too many factors... I think I would be dancing on a knife’s edge, engaged in a kind of wizard battle as we travel. It would be difficult, to say the least.” That sounded like an honest assessment, anyway.

“Well, what do you think? Should we leave the territory?” Ritsuka asked, turning the question around. Although she thought she knew what Douman would say. He would want to remain in his comfortable Territory, like a typical magus. To his credit, though, Douman gave it serious thought. Ritsuka swallowed as she noticed how handsome he was and her mind went back to him destroying the training dummies. While his fury had been scary, the graceful way he moved, the power of his strikes and the drops of sweat running down sculpted muscles had been interesting...

“Master, do you have any talent for clairvoyance?” Douman suddenly asked and Ritsuka stared, surprised.

“Uh, not that I know of.” Although clairvoyance wasn’t a rare talent, exactly, it was just very unreliable. Most magus who had it never bothered to train it, unless they were strong enough to constantly be having visions. “I don’t think the tests to join Chaldeas tested for that. Why though?” Did Douman want HER to do divinations? Douman sighed, running a hand through his hair. The distracted, mildly distressed look on his face hit Ritsuka in the libido hard. *How is he so handsome when he isn’t trying?*

“The only solution I can think of to this conundrum is divinations to determine the correct course of action, but I am so bad at clairvoyance! That’s the reason I attempted to cheat in my duel,” Douman admitted and Ritsuka nodded. After meeting Douman, she was sure he’d have preferred to win on his skill. So it followed that he’d known he couldn’t. “It might be stronger if we combine our efforts, particularly if you have any talent for it. And a few artifacts, like tufts of your hair, would be useful.” Oh, she knew the kind of divination he was talking about!

“You’re going to use paper figures?” Like origami, but simpler. Douman nodded.

“One to represent me, and another to represent you. If we can only do it properly, the results should be informative.” Ritsuka felt relieved and cheerful at the thought. This kind of divination was ancient and it often didn’t work, but it was easy to teach so she knew exactly what to do. “A drop of blood and a bit of hair, you know the spell?”

“Yes, exactly! I haven’t used it for years, but I know it.” They would use different words, but it was still the same spell. “I can do the one for me and you can do the one for you.” That would definitely help the spell. Douman smiled in pleasure at her answer.

“I’m pleased to see that some things are timeless. Well, we should get started now.” Douman stood, but took a moment to tidy up the tea set, rinsing out the cups and putting everything away. Ritsuka had noticed he seemed to have a mania for neatness, it was rather nice. That time she’d had to share a room with Liz for a while...

Shuddering a little and attempting to blot the thought out of her mind – it had been AWFUL – Ritsuka followed Douman to the work room. As they went inside, Ritsuka glanced around, struck by how plain it was. It was just a box of a room, with a table and two chairs. There was also a small chest of drawers in the corner, with a pitcher of water on top. Douman went to the chest and opened one of the drawers, easily finding some paper. He offered her a piece and Ritsuka accepted it. Then they both spent a few minutes carefully folding their origami figures.

“Pthaw,” Ritsuka looked up from her work at that minor sound of disgust. “My skill at origami is pathetic.” Oh, he was done already? ...It did look pretty deformed though.

“At least it’s standing! Mine might fall over,” Ritsuka said cheerfully and Douman chuckled softly. Wow, he’d already tied a tuft of hair to it and put in a spot of blood! She needed to go faster. Concentrating hard, Ritsuka finished her figure and tried to set it on the table... where it promptly fell over. “Drat!”

“I can use a bit of magic to hold it up. Here, use this for your hair and blood.” Douman offered her a pair of scissors and a little pin. Ritsuka accepted them, reflecting that he must have just made them, scissors surely didn’t exist in Heian Japan. Then as she finished her doll, he went back to the drawers and pulled out a map. Douman spread the map out of the table and Ritsuka saw it was the same map he’d used originally, to pick out this spot to settle. It had all the little markings and drawings, which made it very easy to see the red spot they were currently at.

“Hmm.... Let’s do multiple different directions and then finally, staying in the Territory.” Douman muttered and Ritsuka nodded. “Cardinal directions... let’s start with East.” He set his doll on the table and Ritsuka added hers, helpfully held up with a tiny spell from Douman. Then they both began to chat. The words of the incantations were different but it really didn’t matter, when it was an identical spell.

They finished the incantation at almost the same time and Ritsuka watched the dolls intently, willing them to do something, anything to show the divination had worked. After a long moment she began to feel disappointed... but then the doll with the tuft of red hair was suddenly bisected by an invisible force, falling into four pieces. Ritsuka gasped, hearing Douman’s quiet curse as the doll representing him caught fire. He swept it off the map before anything could catch and it quickly burnt into nothing but ash.

“Well, that was extremely clear.” Douman’s tone was dry and Ritsuka swallowed. “Let’s make new dolls and try North.” Right, although now Ritsuka didn’t have high hopes.

She was right not to. They tried all the cardinal directions and each one met with the same result, which led them both to an unpleasant conclusion.

“If we try to leave, I will lose my battle to keep us hidden and we will be attacked with no defenses,” Douman summed up the situation and Ritsuka nodded, feeling discouraged. “Well, while this may be depressing, let’s see what the prognostication is for remaining.” What were they to do if that was bad, too? Try their very hardest to reach outside the Singularity? Just getting Mash could make all the difference. Douman set down the last two dolls and they chanted the spell a final time. Ritsuka watched the dolls and this time it took so long that she

really wondered if the spell had failed, but finally something happened. The little doll with the tuft of red hair vanished and the doll with the black hair was knocked down. They both watched to see if anything else would happen, but it just sat there.

“Is it... wet?” Douman muttered and Ritsuka blinked, looking at the doll a bit more closely. It did seem oddly damp. Douman reached out and picked up the doll with the tips of his nails before sniffing it. “Alcohol. Sake?” ...Weird. What could that mean? “But oddly foul. I wonder what this means.”

“Well, at least it seems to mean we’re not dead.” Ritsuka said, trying to be upbeat. Douman sighed, setting the doll off the map.

“True, although the way your doll vanished indicates we used my emergency teleportation.” That was true. “Yet, my doll remained... well, this is hardly set in stone. I believe I will at least attempt to reach outside the Singularity tomorrow.” He didn’t sound optimistic though. “I doubt I have the mana stored to manage it but you never know. If your friends are trying, perhaps I can make contact.” That was a point, Da Vinci and Sherlock would be trying hard to reach them.

“Right. But for now, we really should get some rest.” It was very late and they’d both had a tiring day. Sure, Douman didn’t actually need to sleep but Ritsuka could tell that he wasn’t quite himself from the events of the day. They both needed some rest to clear their minds.

“Mmm hmm.” ...Was something wrong? Douman seemed oddly preoccupied. Ritsuka was going to ask but then her eyes went wide as a warm hand touched her cheek, his nails brushing her skin in a way that made her shiver. Then Douman gave her a gentle kiss on her forehead and Ritsuka gasped a little at a gesture that should have felt innocent yet was anything but. “Have a good night, Master.” His voice was like a dark caress and Ritsuka squeaked.

“G-Goodnight!” Then she beat a quick retreat, feeling a deep ache in her body. Was that... an invitation? Should she... maybe...?

Ritsuka was still thinking about it when she fell asleep and her dreams were full of dark eyes and a seductive voice saying things she could never quite understand.

## Chapter 7

As the night went on Ritsuka's sleep deepened and as it did, she began to dream.

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*It was summer, and it was hot. Insects buzzed and the hot, humid air was nearly choking as the sun beat down unmercifully. But work still had to be done and an axe swung.*

*The blow bit deep into the tree trunk and he could feel the recoil all through his arms, but it didn't matter. Adjusting the angle a little, he did it again. And again. And again. Each blow was powerful and the tree groaned, tilting slightly. With the ease of long practice, the young man felling the tree adjusted his position. When the tree came down, it would be safe enough.*

*The tree landed exactly where he wanted and with grim determination, he began to chop it up into smaller chunks. This would be firewood for the town, not planks of wood. It would be easier to cart off in chunks. Other members of the crew were already gathering chunks of wood and taking them away.*

*He was pausing to take a drink when there was a strange commotion. Several people were talking, but it had nothing to do with him. He finished the water and picked up the axe... but then it suddenly became something to do with him as they all headed his way.*

*"What?" He questioned, irritated. Was this going to be about his fighting again?*

*"Douman... your mother is dead." .... What? "She fell into the river, we just found her body." ...No. That wasn't possible, his mother couldn't swim, she wouldn't be careless with the water.*

*"Is this a joke?" But no, it wasn't a joke, these weren't the boys in the village it was the actual men, they didn't make stupid jokes. "I'm going back right now!" Fuck these trees! He expected them to stop him, but to his growing horror, they only nodded.*

*"Yes, we were sent to fetch you." ..No. No no no! Dropping the axe, he hurried away, then began to run.*

*This was a stupid joke. His mother was fine!*

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*It wasn't a joke and his mother wasn't fine.*

*Douman kept his face still as a stone as the funeral was held. He could feel the glances, the hidden malice and knew there were some people who would love to see him cry. And he would shed tears, but in private. He had very little but pride, but he did have that.*

*Now, though, he was expected to take his mother's place at the inn. It was easier work than felling trees, in a lot of ways, but it gave him more time to think. Douman didn't need that*



*right now, deep in his grief. He craved the release of not thinking that hard work could give him and he found it in scrubbing. The inn had likely never been this clean before.*

*He was deep in scrubbing when someone he considered a friend slipped into the inn.*

*“Douman...” He looked up from his work, frowning as he saw a familiar moon faced girl. He didn’t like her, exactly... it wasn’t her fault, but she was very stupid and trying to explain things to her was a painful trial. But Douman couldn’t be picky and she was the pond scum of the social pool, just like him, so they were friends. “I overheard Aru and Yemon... they were... talking...” Yes, they would have to be for her to overhear them.*

*“What were they saying?” Oh, look, she’d gotten distracted and was looking at the light coming in through the windows. “Inu!” She started and Douman noticed that something wasn’t right. Inu wasn’t distracted like she normally was, she was looking at things like she was afraid?*

*“They were... gloating... to Maru... they said... your mother... was on the bridge... they pushed her...” Inu wrung her hands together as Douman froze. “I’m sorry I had to tell you I had to...” They pushed her. They pushed her? Douman was starting to shake as he felt a rage unlike any he’d experienced in his life. There was a buzzing in his ears and it felt like there was strange fire under his skin. That actually hurt, it was a real thing, but he didn’t care.*

*“I’m going to kill them.” That was set in stone, how the future would be.*

*“Douman no!” Inu tried to stop him but she was a slight girl and he was a giant of a young man. He just pushed past her and left the inn. Vaguely, Douman knew he would be executed – he had no proof and Yemon was the headman’s son – but he didn’t care. They were going to die.*

*When he found them, they were lounging around and chatting and laughing. That laughter went right to his rage and ignited it in fire and the burning under his skin turned into sharp pains as Douman felt an odd snap.*

*“CHOKER AND DIE!” Douman roared and felt like that fire came out of his skin. They didn’t die, but they started to choke and it wasn’t enough, not NEARLY enough, so he waded in with his fists. They tried to fight back but Douman was bigger and stronger – he might be the strongest person in the village – and he pummeled them as there were shouts for help. But they wouldn’t stop him before he killed them!*

*Then something invisible but incredibly powerful looped around his chest, yanking him back.*

*“Enough!” NO! It wasn’t enough, it would never be enough! Douman lurched forward as the rage and denial made his skin burn again, that snap needed to happen again... it did and he jerked forward, breaking whatever that invisible tether was – “ENOUGH!” What happened this time was very different and Douman was forced to stop as his mind seemed to freeze. All his joints locked up and his rage was like a monster caught in a cage, raging futilely against the bar “Who owns this boy?” What?*

*"I am not a dog and they killed my mother," Douman said hoarsely as the person doing this came into his view. Oh, he knew this man, he had come to the inn last night. Why hadn't he left yet? Wait, was he some kind of wizard? The simple travelling robe he wore had given them no hints.*

*"I don't care." FUCK YOU! "Who owns this boy?" He demanded again and one of the girls answered. The two boys he'd been hitting were still down and Douman noted, with pleasure, that one of them really might be dead.*

*"He doesn't have a father and his mother is dead." That sent a jolt of pain through his chest.*

*"Then fetch me the headman, now!" Why, so they could execute him faster? The headman wasn't going to be happy about his son's condition. Douman laughed, feeling a dark joy at the thought. "Very good. You show great promise." What?*

*The headman was horrified when he arrived but Douman took only joy in it as he desperately shook his son. To his disappointment, the other boy moaned. He'd thought he'd killed him! Well, at least he might never be the same, a lot of hits to the head could do that.*

*"Enough! I have no interest in these children, only this boy." The stranger lay a hand on Douman's shoulder. "What is your name?" His name?*

*"Chensho Douman," Douman said, wondering why he cared.*

*"No longer. You are Ashiya Douman, and I claim you for my apprentice." Apprentice... in magic? Wait, that strange snapping feeling, had that been magic? "Record this correctly and send the record to the courts." This was all going too fast for him. Was this stranger ADOPTING him? Douman wanted to protest but the thought of magic silenced him. Learning how to control that fire under his skin... he wanted that now, wanted it very much. As the wizard dragged him away, though, Douman cast a baleful glare back.*

*There was one thing he wanted more, and it was those boys' dead. Sooner or later, he would kill them.*

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Douman woke early in the morning feeling refreshed, energized and ready for powerful rituals.

*It's good I waited. I just wasn't ready for this yesterday,* he mused to himself as he pulled himself out of bed and did his usual stretch, leisurely popping every joint. *So much energy spent.* Using his Noble Phantasm, the training dummies and then fixing all of the curses... it had sapped his mental energy as much as the actual, leaving him calm but in a very poor state for strenuous spellcasting. Fortunately, that mental state had been ideal for divination. Perhaps that was part of why the spells had gone so well.

Setting that thought aside, Douman went to start breakfast. It was rice porridge, made from leftover rice from the night before, and a bit of dried fish. Humming to himself, he stirred the pot. Ah, how he enjoyed cooking breakfast. It brought him back and any moment now Ane would hug him from behind –

Then someone DID hug him from behind and for a moment, Douman wondered if he'd lost his mind. Then he looked down and saw that familiar – and horrible – shirt, and remembered how to breath.

“Master?” Douman asked cautiously, feeling her resting against his back.

“I just had a dream last night...” A dream? What was she – OH. Douman hadn't thought much of that dream, but being reminded brought a kind of sad melancholy to mind. He set the wooden spoon aside and gently patted her hand.

“It was a very long time ago.” The only thing he regretted, with the wisdom of age, was accidentally putting his mother in danger. At the time, Douman had been a scrappy youngster with the body of a powerful man and a terrible temper. With his extremely low social status as the bastard of the tavern woman, it was no wonder he'd gotten into fights. Looking back on it, Douman knew he could have handled things better. “Ah well.” He'd killed those boys – men by the time he'd mastered the curses – a long time ago. His Master squeezed him one last time before letting go. “The porridge should be done soon.” It was almost the right consistency but it needed just a bit more. The tea was already done.

When the porridge was done, Douman brought it to the table and set it on a nice little wooden trivet. Ah, this simple food reminded him of his childhood, so long ago. The tea matched as well... it was really quite poor, bad quality leaves with wild herbs mixed in to stretch the mix. But Douman had made it well and it complemented the simple meal perfectly. They both served themselves and as they ate, Douman noticed Ritsuka seemed... troubled? Or merely thoughtful?

“Douman... you killed them, didn't you?” Ritsuka finally asked and Douman smiled.

“Of course.” He couldn't help himself... his smile widened into a toothy grin. “I cursed them to die by drowning.” It had been appropriate. Ritsuka nodded and Douman sensed only acceptance from her. Hn. “You know, Master, I think I see why you scored so highly in Servant compatibility,” he said before taking a sip of his tea. “You might not agree with my actions, or would do such a thing yourself, but you can look upon them without judgement.” That was truly impressive. Ritsuka turned a bit pink.

“Uh, thank you! You know, if you were still alive, I think you would make a good Master too.” Douman blinked at the thought. In a way, it didn't sound likely – the thought of truly good heroes accepting him seemed laughable – but Douman did know his own nature quite well. Despite his flaws, he was very good at understanding the thoughts and motivations of those around him.

“Perhaps, but we will never know.” Unless he wished for that but... no, he really wanted his original wish. Nothing was as important as humbling that complete and utter asshole! NOTHING! ...Well, maybe one thing, but killing his Alter Ego was going to be necessary to take the Grail anyway...

Enjoying his pleasantly homicidal thoughts, Douman ate his porridge, enjoying the familiar flavors of salt and rice. The salted fish was nice, although eggs or sausage would have been better. If he had been planning to stay long term, Douman might have considered setting up a

chicken coup. Fresh eggs were always wonderful and his familiars could take care of cleaning the coup, which was always the worst part.

“Well, time to get started.” Douman finally said, pushing away his tea. While it would be pleasant to linger, he had work to do. Ritsuka smiled and he felt a deep relief and anticipation. Mmm, her hopes shouldn’t be too high, Douman didn’t think he was going to get through. His main goal was to finally perceive the Singularity.

The workroom was spacious and Douman moved the table, setting it aside before pulling out his chinks. Chink was always an excellent way to inscribe mystical symbols and he’d given this room a smooth, stone floor for just that reason. The only thing better was actual, physical inscription but that was for permanent rituals, not something cobbled together on the fly. Douman obviously had no spell for just this situation, but he had several related things...

It took several tries, and multiple uses of magic to clean the floor, before Douman had something he thought was suitable. Pleased with the results, Douman held out both hands, palms down and began to intone the incantation. The words didn’t really matter, they were a focus for his power and intent, but he’d still planned them out. Flubbing a long incantation was an apprentice mistake.

The lines of chalk flared with red light but Douman was oblivious as his consciousness was elevated. It was a bit like meditation, a bit like escaping his body but not really either of those things as he temporarily found a higher plane. As he did, Douman sensed the curvature of a dome, a mystical cage that was overwhelming in scale. Penetrating it seemed an impossible task but narrowing his focus to the tiniest of pinpricks, Douman tried to reach out.

It failed. It couldn’t help but fail, but for the briefest of moments Douman penetrated and felt a contact, a sensation of something falling into place. A brief, confused impression of a blurred interior and a voice raised, flashing lights... and then he lost the contact, his consciousness retracting. It caused intense dizziness and Douman lurched, almost falling as the spell abruptly cut off.

“Douman!” Ritsuka’s arms caught and steadied him. “Are you alright?”

“I...” Was he alright? Something had happened. Douman blinked rapidly, trying to sort out his own mind. “I did make contact, just for a moment. I... learned something.” Many somethings. Fragments of knowledge gleamed like broken stars, useless but beautiful. “I understand better this “Imaginary Sea” now.” It was still difficult to wrap his head around, but a bit more understandable. Douman had always known numbers were important to magic – some of his best curses were based on math – but he’d never imagined it taken to this degree.

“Douman? What happened?” Ah, yes, he should try to explain. Douman did his best and Ritsuka looked thoughtful. “I think you made contact with Da Vinci. Well, that’s good, they’ll be ready for when we try again!” Mmm, but when would that be?

“This ley line nexus is insufficient. After our battle with that cursed doppleganger, we should seek something better.” But what? What he really needed was a ready-made wizard’s workroom, a powerful ley line nexus, the kind of thing that took years if not decades to

prepare. Well, could he just FIND a powerful wizard and kick them out? But taking on an onmyouji in their own sanctum was insanely dangerous!

Douman froze as an idea suddenly came to him. It was insane verging on lunacy but if it could work, it would solve all of their problems. Could he make it work though? His mind went to those odd bits of knowledge he'd just been graced with. If he could use something that alien in his spells, perhaps it COULD work. The first test a win, the second a loss but what could the third be? It couldn't be divination, he would lose, but what contest could he propose that wouldn't be rejected out of hand?

"Douman?" Oh. Douman roused himself from his fugue with a blink, gazing into his Master's face. Ritsuka's hair was adorably tousled and she was staring at him with deep concern. That wretched uniform suddenly irritated him again – he HATED that zipper – and with a snap of his fingers, he clothed her in the travelling kimono again, making her squeak.

"My Master should be presentable for the coming battle. Let me set some wards on you, to defeat an errant Assassin." Douman said easily, preparing his magic. Because... "I feel something nefarious coming our way." The leylines were trembling. Something powerful was on the move. "Ah, finally, the time has come!" Douman was very much looking forward to it.

He'd spent so much time making a beautiful net of curses. It would be a shame for all the effort to go to waste.

Author's note: Stopping here because if I try to do the battle, this chapter will be super long. Action next chapter!

## Chapter 8

Douman had a dirty secret and that was his love of fighting.

Not that he was ashamed of it. Far from it! Douman loved nothing more than being locked in a life and death struggle, feeling the thrill of battle and the satisfying *crunch* when his fist broke bones. But what he truly loved was using his body along with his magic, employing his great strength and speed to crush an opponent. And for a powerful wizard, an onmyouji, that was simply Not Done. You were supposed to have a decorous challenge where both wizards demonstrated their skill, or at the most, faced off against each other and cast their spells from a distance. Incredibly unsatisfying. The one thing Douman had enjoyed about all those years travelling had been the many, many battles he'd faced where nothing mattered but winning.

So despite the danger, Douman was very much looking forward to this battle. The labyrinth would funnel the enemy to a good spot for sniping and Douman would do that, but he was sure it would come down to blows. In fact, it was possible that his enemy might just start smashing walls rather than follow the paths, because he could already sense he was facing a Berserker. There was also a weak, irregular signature that Douman identified with vindictive glee as the Alter Ego. *Three days was too charitable. He won't make it past two.* That creature wasn't going to be up to much, from what he was sensing. The Berserker would be his primary opponent.

Curses started activating and Douman grinned. Was the Berserker just going to bull through them? How foolish! True, taken individually each curse was nothing to a Servant but they would accumulate, gradually leading to insane amounts of damage. Then at least ten of his curses activated at once and Douman's grin faded. How...?

Gesturing and muttering a quick incantation, Douman switched his perspective to one of the many familiars he'd hidden in a special vantage point, with an excellent view of the ruins. What he saw took his breath away. Swivelling the shikigami, Douman observed a small army of lesser oni – they were so weak he hadn't even sensed them – herding humans, poor villagers, into his maze. Several hundred at least and including children, they didn't want to go but the oni prodded them along, using them as living fodder to defuse his curses. Douman could only feel a kind of horrified admiration for it. *How twisted! How cruel! And how incredibly, brutally effective!*

*Douman? What is it?* Ritsuka's voice came and Douman realized he'd broadcast that thought to her. Instead of answering aloud, he reached out via his mental link and showed her the scene revealed by his familiar. *OH MY GOD! DOUMAN, STOP THEM RIGHT NOW!* Stop them? Was that a wise decision? Well, it partially was.

Doing what made sense first, Douman gestured with both hands and spoke a brutally short word of dismissal. All the curses were immediately dispelled, but in a way that did not waste the mana, funnelling the strength back to him. Douman hesitated then, considering doing nothing and waiting but... he knew oni. They would likely slaughter the villagers. So he employed the strength he'd just been granted, trying not to expend anything more, and

directed it to the familiars with just one command: *kill the oni*. Then he went back to the one he'd been using as a viewing platform and shared the awareness with Ritsuka once again.

A flurry of shikigami rose up and fired tiny green blasts. They were nothing to a Servant, mere pinpricks, but highly suitable to annihilate the weak oni. They went up in sparks and the villagers, not being stupid, saw the chance. They turned tail and fled, some in pure panic, others helping the old and injured. Douman was pleased, although he knew the nature of the Berserker he would be fighting. *Only an oni could command oni*.

*Ibaraki!* Ritsuka gasped and Douman watched calmly as the Berserker just smashed her way through the remaining defenses. Behind her, draped in darkness and seething with rage, was the Alter Ego. To Douman's pleasure, he could see that several of the creature's nails had fallen off and the patches left behind looked excruciatingly painful. His face seemed unaffected but the hair was disarranged, the tight ringlets of his court style looking like he'd slept in them after rambunctious sex. (Douman knew exactly what his hair looked like in that situation)

*Do not be alarmed, Master. The loss of the curses is a setback but I am reasonably confident.* Douman told her as the Berserker grinned wickedly. She was taking the form of a young woman, strangely enough. Her horns made her race clear.

"Hey, Caster! You – ULP!" Douman wasn't interested in listening to her so he took the opportunity to attack her from behind with a few hidden familiars. She had to jump and dance to avoid the powerful strikes. "HEY! Stop interrupt – YIPE!" Douman launched his own attack then and jumped into the battle, causing her to narrowly avoid a fist to the face. Hmm, very agile, how troublesome.

"Talking with oni is for fools!" They only wanted to fight or fuck. Douman knew that extremely well. "DIE, FILTH!" Douman assaulted her with curses, which to his mild confusion, she didn't bother to dodge. Then he heard the Alter Ego chanting and Douman cursed internally. Was that their plan?

That was indeed the plan. The Berserker hammered at him with her fists and sword while the Alter Ego hung back, employing his magic to cleanse her of the curses Douman levelled at her. That was vexing, but Douman had far more at his disposal than curses and he switched to elemental magic, employing blasts of lightning (that had always been his preferred element, for some reason). As he did, he kept a careful eye on the Alter Ego. There would be a good moment.

"How is a Caster this... strong?!?" The oni panted and Douman knew she was referring to his physical strength. It was very abnormal for a wizard, by any measure. He was also feeling no real fatigue, which was also abnormal. If only those qualities had been remotely useful in his battle against Abe no Seimei. The Alter Ego was just watching the conflict, his eyes flat and his posture full of tension. "RARRGHH!" Douman was caught by surprise as the oni suddenly dropped her sword and attempted to GRAPPLE him. She was too close for him to evade so he allowed it, their hands meeting as they both struggled to overmaster each other. Douman set his feet, using his greater height and heavier build to good effect, as the oni used her Berserker strength.

“I don’t know how I am like this, but I know I am STRONGER THAN YOU!” Douman roared, summoning his full strength. The Berserker yelped in surprise as he overmastered her and then picked her up and moving with blinding speed to toss her right into the Alter Ego as he readied a powerful curse –

**CRUNCH.** Douman stopped dead, feeling intense pain. Blood filled his mouth as he looked down, into the face of a strange woman. Her horns told him her race as she smiled, flashing her fangs as blood dripped down the sword she had impaled him with.

“Put her down, sweetie. Gently now,” she crooned, stroking his cheek and aware of his incredibly precarious position, Douman complied. The sword was pulled out of his body and Douman grunted, feeling strength returning. He could still fight, although how long he would be able was an open question. “How strange! That should have been a fatal blow! You are so INTERESTING!” Well, so was she, that was impressive Presence Concealment to surprise him so thoroughly.

*By the power of my Command Seal, be healed!* Strength came back to him in a heady rush and Douman grinned wickedly, matching the Assassins’ grin. He was now up against THREE Servants. Wasn’t life grand? He leapt back, using his familiars to cover the retreat and engage the two oni as Douman evaluated his chances.

They were awful. The Assassin was, if anything, stronger than the Berserker and sure that victory was close at hand the Alter Ego was beginning to cast offensive spells. It was DEFINITELY time to get out. Douman gestured with both hands, unleashing multiple minor curses from his nails to distract them just before activating the emergency teleport.

For Douman, what happened next was like running headlong into a brick wall. He slammed into an incredibly powerful obstacle, nothing he’d ever dreamed *could* exist, and rebounded. Instead of materializing at the backup location, he rematerialized in the broken ruins and slammed onto the ground with stunning force. Choking on a bit of blood, Douman realized he’d just broken multiple bones from the two impacts. *How did he do that?* It had to be the work of the Alter Ego, but how had he blocked a teleport? The power required was astronomical, even with the identical twin problem! *No wonder he wasn’t doing much.* He’d been carefully preparing this to capture Douman alive. Even in the middle of his pain, Douman couldn’t help but admire it.

*Douman, where are you? I’m in the caves, where are you?* Ritsuka asked and Douman opened his eyes to mere slits as he heard footfalls, saw diseased looking toes beside his head. A foot came down on his chest and he grunted, as the nails dug into his skin.

*My teleportation was blocked, Master. I will do my best to survive.* Although the only things he had left were his wits and will. Well, he would just have to use them, on the oni most likely.

“Well, my ‘true self’, it seems I have you at my mercy. What shall I do with you?” The Alter Ego’s voice was not what it should be, rasping and hoarse.

*Douman, by the power of my Command Seal* – Douman’s eyes went wide with horror as he sensed Ritsuka’s intent.



***“No!”*** The Alter Ego actually recoiled at his outburst and Douman heard laughter from the two oni as he tried to quickly explain. *Master, if you use a Command Seal to summon me I will run headlong into that blocking again. It will destroy me before I can pass through.* He had absolutely no doubt of that. Just one experience had nearly killed him. Douman felt Ritsuka’s chagrin before another clawed foot touched him, this time lightly on the cheek.

“Aw, was the Master missing her Servant? Well I can’t blame her, you are definitely a fine looking man.” Douman licked his lips and looked up at the barely clad Assassin oni. He pictured her bleeding, her body savaged by his claws. “You’re thinking about killing me, aren’t you? You have an oni’s soul.” Oddly enough, that reminded Douman of his apprenticeship. His Master had said that to him many times, normally in an exasperated tone.

“Enough interruptions!” A hand went around his neck and Douman grunted as he was pulled to his feet, then off his feet. He gripped the Alter Ego’s hand, gazing hatefully into his face. “Remove this curse from me now, or I will tear you to bloody ribbons.” What an unimpressive threat. Douman took a deep breath before spitting a great spray of blood and spit into his Alter Ego’s face. “YOU - !” Being slammed back into the ground, headfirst, wasn’t surprising but it still stunned him.

Douman wasn’t allowed to collect his wits. The Alter Ego intoned a quick incantation and his arms and legs were seized by what felt like tentacles. They were cool but not clammy, scaled like a snake. Then another spell followed and Douman arched as his body seized up. It felt like his muscles were fighting against each other, in a full body spasm that caused the broken bones to grate against each other. Douman could not have said how long it went on, before his Alter Ego intoned a quick word of dismissal. He gasped as his muscles were allowed to relax, shuddering in agony. And hatred blazed through him like a dark fire as he gazed up at his smug Alter Ego.

“I can do this as many times as needed. Remove the curse, now.”

“Fool. As many times as needed?” Douman rasped out, meeting flat back eyes, so like his own yet not. “You can’t do it enough times to make me submit.” The pain was nothing compared to his determination and sheer rage. The Alter Ego’s expression darkened with anger but then a hand touched his arm.

“You’re doing this all wrong. Ibaraki!” Douman grunted as he was hoisted to his feet, broken bones grating painfully. He wavered but managed to stand, as his arms were pinned behind him by the Berserker oni. The Assassin sauntered in front of him, holding a cup? “Ah, this man... I would love to romp with him in so many ways. He’s nothing like you at all, you cold, reptilian thing.” Reptilian? “His blood is so hot, filled with the rage of a true oni. Ah, I am so aroused right now!” Did she want to eat him or fuck him? Oni did love animalistic copulation... Douman wouldn’t even call it sex, it wouldn’t be that decorous. “But if you want to get something from an oni, torture is not what you should do...” That cup was shoved against his lips and Douman would have refused to drink, but she gripped his nose, sealing his nostrils. Douman had no choice but to drink and he swallowed the alcohol down.

To Douman, the taste was indescribable. It was like honey and sweet sake, perfumed with something acrid and foul. Despite that bitterness he craved it, needed it and lost in that need, he gulped it down. His mind whirled and he sagged in the grip of the other oni, hardly even

noticing the pain of his wounds anymore. Womanly laughter touched his ears and Douman licked his lips, lifting his head and seeing the beauty of the oni woman. She was small and slender but he could still imagine exploring her body with his hands, leaving deep scratches from his claws as they abandoned all civility and rutted like animals...

“Ah, what are you, you strange man.” Her lips met his and Douman feasted on them, feeling this strange, alcohol induced lust like a madness. “Mmm, let me see...” A finger ran over his body, gathering up the blood on his skin and she sampled it, slowly sucking off her finger. Douman could picture her lips fastened over something else. “Half-human, I think. Not quite half-oni though... I taste the taint of the gods.” ...What? “There is oni there too. My my, what a mongrel you are.”

“My father was a tinker,” Douman muttered, not understanding. His mother had told him his father had been a travelling tinker, what was she saying? Her breath was hot in his ear and Douman felt another wave of lust as she spoke.

“Did he tinker with souls? Ah, it doesn’t matter, we made a deal and we’ll fulfill it... remove the curse from this man.” The curse... Douman looked at his Alter Ego and surprisingly, saw something he hadn’t noticed before. *No wonder he’s failing so quickly. What has he done to his Spirit Origin?* There were additional Spirit Origins there, bubbling up and trying to separate. Ah, that must be the source of his abnormal power but with Douman’s Noble Phantasm destroying him it was a massive liability.

“No.” Douman knew if he did that, they would have no reason to keep him alive any longer. There was a heavy sigh from the oni woman.

“I’d hoped your mind was clouded enough to just do it like a fool... mm. I swear, I swear, if you do this for me we’ll let you live.” How could he trust that? Her hand ruffled his hair and it was so difficult to think. “Just trust me. I do keep my promises.” This was... probably the best he would get...

Douman looked at his Alter Ego again, and examined the curse. So beautiful, so intricate, so deadly. Such a shame to undo a work of art he likely could not equal again but with a feeling of deep (and drunken) sadness, he spoke the simple word of dismissal. The power flowed back to him and Douman used it for a quick healing spell, mending the worst of the damage he’d suffered. As he did his mind cleared a little and he realized that the wine the oni woman had fed him was also a potent poison. He snarled weakly at her. Was this what they meant by leaving him alive?

“Good.” Then the Alter Ego was there, resting a hand over his heart and grinning devilishly. Douman noticed, with irritation, that his hair was now pristine and those damn bells were back. “Ah, now what should I do with you...” The Alter Ego was close enough to kiss, now. How utterly foolish. Douman head butted him with enough force to make his own eyes water, let alone his enemy. “ARGH! What is WRONG with you?!”

“He’s an oni, silly, and he’s decided he hates you. When we hate, we hate with all the passion in the world.” the oni Assassin said and Douman’s lips peel back from his teeth in a feral grin. It was almost nice, that someone understood him. The Alter Ego rubbed his forehead with a scowl.

“Completely unreasonable. Ridiculous. I’ll leave him to the two of you, do whatever you like with him.” Then the Alter Ego stalked out, leaving Douman slightly surprised. He was being left with the oni? Was his Alter Ego that confident they would kill him or just didn’t care?

“Uh, Shuten? Are we going to kill him?” The Berserker sounded as dubious as he felt. The Assassin sauntered up to him, grinning. “I know you said we’d let him live but he’s crazy strong and if he’s a half-oni too, we really should kill him.” Yes, that was sensible.

“Oh Ibaraki, Ibaraki... this isn’t just about winning. This is about having fun!” And that sounded like an oni. “And this handsome man is a great deal of fun... but for now, let me do you a favor.” Ah, more of the wine... Douman couldn’t resist even knowing it was poison. He drank the sweet nectar and felt the world go filmy and strange. He heard the laughter of women before all of his pain fell away.

Author’s Note: Limbo wants to talk and reason and seduce but Douman is just FUCK YOU lol

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Servant Name: Ashiya Douman

Alignment: Neutral Evil

Strength: A

Agility: B

Luck: C

Endurance: A+

Mana: A+

NP: C to A++, variable

History: Because of the passage of time, and the embroidering of stories – some made entirely out of whole cloth – the true story of Ashiya Douman was forgotten. He was a child born to humble beginnings as the bastard son of a tavern worker. He was told his father was a travelling tinker, which was not entirely true... his father was a powerful spirit although his precise identity is unknown.

As a teenage boy, Douman’s mother was murdered, leading to his first use of magic and his apprenticeship to a provincial wizard. He became extremely proficient in magic and curses and when Douman decided to go to the capital to prove his might, he aimed as high as possible and decided to challenge Abe no Seimei.

That challenge went according to the known stories... Douman lost both the first and second challenges, tried to cheat on the third and was defeated. And as the stories record, he made a brash comment about the third challenge, that the loser should be the servant of the other. It was only a boastful comment but Abe no Seimei never let it go, bringing it up any time he wanted to needle Douman or try to get something from him. That was what truly started the

feud between them because Douman was extremely prideful and being reminded of his failure was a thorn in his side.

What sealed the feud, though, was when Abe no Seimei needed phoenix feathers for a particular spell. Knowing that only another wizard could reliably get them, yet having no way to send one, Abe no Seimei manipulated Douman into losing his temper in front of the Emperor. Then Abe no Seimei brought up the servant comment and suggested the Emperor send Douman on his errand. The Emperor agreed and in disgrace from his loss of temper, Douman had no choice but to comply. That led to four years of travelling and by the end of it, Douman had sworn eternal enmity with Abe no Seimei. From then on, there would be no quarter.

Abe no Seimei and Douman clashed, in courtly intrigues and violent altercations, for nearly twenty years. During that time, Abe no Seimei never really took the feud seriously, fueling Douman's rage. Douman's efforts finally bore fruit when he seduced Abe no Seimei's wife and murdered his rival. Then he took Ane for his wife, and took Abe no Seimei's family as well, sealing his final victory. (or so he thought)

For six years, Douman finally found peace, living a life of quiet usefulness to the Emperor and having a wife he truly loved and a growing fondness for his step-children. This was the happiest time of his life. It came to a quick and brutal end when Abe no Seimei returned from the dead and Douman took his own life to spare his wife. He died without regrets.

Personality: In many ways, Douman is almost the ideal magus. His mystic power is great, and he possesses the mindset of a true magus, to whom magic is always the most important thing. Douman is also excellent at understanding and anticipating the actions of others, giving him a great skill at planning. He is not the best at political infighting, but that is because of his temper.

The one way Douman does not match the ideal of a magus is his volcanic temper. As an adult, he has it well under control but he is still prone to outbursts and the intensity of them is inhuman and terrifying. This is a large part of why history recorded him as the incarnation of evil... Douman's rages left a lasting impression. Douman is also capable of holding long term grudges, spanning decades and will inevitably seek vengeance.

Because Douman was summoned at the height of his power as Caster, he was summoned as he was after he acquired Abe no Seimei's spellbook. So while appearing youthful, thanks to spells, he is actually middle aged verging on old and many of his actions will reflect that. In particular, he is less likely to randomly bed women than his younger self.

Abilities:

Magecraft A = Douman is a Master of spellcraft. Because he is summoned after acquiring the grimoire of Abe no Seimei, it is no exaggeration to say he is equal to the other great onmyouji. A wide variety of spells are at his fingertips.

Cursecraft A++ = While it might be considered part of Magecraft, Douman's particular focus is on curses. The curses in his nails are his version of a Mage Crest and can be cast instantly,

with only a tiny gesture. Douman can also lay down static curses and create a complex net of curses within his Territory.

Territory Creation A+ = Douman's particular Territory causes certain limitations to be posed onto enemy Servants. They must pass through his labyrinth, although they can attempt to smash the walls (although that usually is not helpful at all). However, attempting to use flight or teleportation to evade the web of curses will cause a particularly nasty curse to activate, making the entire territory spiritually hostile and downgrading the invading spirit by two ranks in all stats. It should be noted that all Servants instinctively sense that cheating is a bad idea.

Item Construction A: Typical for a magus

Monstrous Strength: Not a typical ability for a wizard at all, Douman has monstrous strength thanks to his father. He uses it instinctively in hard battles, unaware of this ability.

Battle Continuation: Another boon from Douman's father, he is incredibly hard to kill and will continue long past when his endurance should be exhausted. Douman attributes this to the power of his temper.

Divinity C: Douman is completely unaware of this and would be very surprised to hear it.

Noble Phantasm: Rot, Decay and Vanish: Douman's Noble Phantasm is the ultimate curse that he learned from Abe no Seimei's spellbook. Because of the circumstances of being summoned into the Caster class, this spell becomes Douman's Noble Phantasm and takes on a new form. This curse is linked directly to Douman's mental state and the power is ranked according to how enraged he is. When Douman is completely calm, this is a C ranked Noble Phantasm. It can be B, A or A++. At A++ rank it is a Primordial Rune of death and decay that cannot be dispelled by any normal means.

Trivia:

Karna's armor would not protect him from Douman's Noble Phantasm in any way. (not surprising, perhaps, since his death was related to curses)

Gilgamesh has an item in Gate that can reliably dispel even the highest rank of Douman's NP. His armor would stop the lower ranks of it from even landing, although not the very highest rank.

Rune wielders like Cu Chulainn, Sigurd and Brynhildr can't dispel the highest rank of Douman's Noble Phantasm, but they could use their own runes to delay it significantly. They could possibly even arrest it, although that would leave them in a half-decayed state.

Douman developed his mocking, ridiculing way of speaking in the Emperor's court and finds it a very hard habit to shake.

## Chapter 9

In a drug induced stupor, Douman dreamed.

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*In a darkened workroom, white hands used a mortar and pestle, grinding down spices. This was a custom curse, requested by the Emperor and Douman would have to work hard to achieve the precise effects his master wanted. So he devoted full attention to his work, getting the spices to just the right consistency, not too rough and not too fine.*

*There was a soft cough behind him and Douman paused, his mind strangely calm despite the invasion of his sanctum. As he did, he realized that there was a touch of unreality to what he was doing. Ah, he was dreaming, a fully lucid dream and there was someone behind him.*

*Turning around, Douman beheld a strange sight. Himself, but wearing his full court raiment, the beautiful vestments of a Buddhist priest. He rarely wore that, it was a political statement and Douman had no interest, but sometimes it was called for. His hair was long and in beautiful ringlets, the full court style that took an hour to prepare, even with magic to assist. Douman was incredibly plain in comparison, wearing only a coal hakama and a simple brown obi to hold it in place.*

*“Can we talk?” Vaguely, Douman knew he should hate this person but the feeling was strangely muffled, hidden beneath gauzy layers of drugs and dreams. Shrugging slightly, Douman turned back to his work.*

*“It’s mildly bothersome, but I suppose the Emperor does not actually need this spell. Do you mind if I continue to work? I find that it calms me.” That had always been true, working in his sanctum was like a meditation. There was a soft sigh from behind him.*

*“Very well.... But how did this come to be? How could I have been born from a man like you?” That was almost plaintive. Complaining about the unfairness of world, albeit very mildly. Douman shrugged.*

*“When humanity dreams, it dreams large, in brilliant technicolor. The petty story of two onmyouji locked in contention for spite and favor is not enough. It must be a story of good and evil, darkness and light, with the fate of the world at stake.” Hmm, this was good, the spices were at the right consistency. Douman tapped them out into a waiting container before wiping out the mortar with a small cloth. Then he went to the wall – he had a lovely spice rack, covering most of one wall – and searched for a particular bottle. Ah, there it was. “Also, the written accounts were likely lost. When a story is passed down by mouth and song, it will become both simplified and inaccurate.” Douman turned around with his new jar, looking at his doppelganger again. There was no real expression on his face and his eyes were flat, absorbing the light. “Tell me, if you had Abe no Seimei at your mercy, what would you do?” Since history had recorded them as enemies, his Alter Ego would surely have an interesting answer. Not disappointing him, the Alter Ego slowly grinned.*

*"Hmm, it's just hard to know where I would start. I suppose I would..." Douman listened patiently as his Alter Ego detailed a process of slow torture that sounded absolutely appalling. And yet...*

*"You wouldn't enjoy the result from that. A true Onmyouji on the level of Abe no Seimei has tremendous mental fortitude." Douman commented as though making a remark about the weather. Then he went to the work bench, measuring out the ingredients. "You would be much better off stripping away his magic and letting him live. That's always an excellent punishment for a wizard, if generic." You couldn't possibly go wrong with that. There was a soft sound of shifting clothing and Douman felt the stranger closer behind him.*

*"What would you do to humble him, then?" ...Heh. Douman turned to face his Alter Ego, his own face stretching into a grin.*

*"I would punch him in the face." From the way the Alter Ego's eyes widened, he'd never expected that. "Repeatedly, making him bleed." The fondest image he had was breaking Abe no Seimei's nose with his fist. He'd fantasized about that SO MANY times.*

*"What?! Why would an onmyouji want that?" The Alter Ego asked and Douman laughed.*

*"BECAUSE I am an onmyouji. Do you have any idea what it's like?" Douman asked before answering his own question. "I am twice his size. My strength is unrivalled. But for decades, I was constrained to fight in a battle I could not win!" His magic just hadn't been enough, not without Abe no Seimei's book. "If I could have just hit him... but I couldn't. I would have been in utter disgrace and exiled, again." He never wanted that to happen again, once was enough. "And he knew it, the arrogant half-kitsune asshole. He would stand in front of me and insult me to my face without even the slightest shred of physical protection." They both knew what he'd been doing. "My greatest dream is to just punch him in the face!"*

*"Surely not just that..." The doppelganger sounded unsure, like he was encountering something quite alien to him. Douman shook his head.*

*"No, of course not... after that, I would tell him what a horrible husband he was and how he deserved to lose his wife." Abe no Seimei would hate that but the truth was what would make it truly sting. "Then, I would tell him the truth about himself and my wish to the Grail would be that he ACCEPT it." Douman relished the thought. "If that didn't make that bastard half-kitsune's face melt, nothing would." Douman was sure that fully facing his own true nature would be crushing to Abe no Seimei. The Alter Ego slowly blinked.*

*"...How interesting. A revenge based entirely on your knowledge of his character," the Alter Ego said and Douman nodded before turning back to his spices, pulling out a nice piece of turmeric. He needed to grate this... "I remember an Abe no Seimei, you know. But now I have a feeling he's not the person you knew."*

*"No. I'm sure that if that Abe no Seimei were summoned, he would be an Alter Ego as well." A strange thought, that had just come to him. "That would be oddly appropriate." The two wizards giving birth to two Alter Ego's, locked in a much grander conflict than had ever really existed.*

*"I suppose." Douman grated the turmeric, more of his attention on the stranger than the spice. He sounded... discontented? "I feel that I don't know you at all." ...Hm.*

*"Well, as this is a dream, we may do whatever we wish." Douman said before setting aside his tools and turning around. "Let me invite you to dinner." The Alter Ego's eyes widened and he seemed taken aback. Douman cocked his head to one side, imagining... yes. "Ane is making supper and it smells good." Now the scent of cooking fish perfumed the air. "You're overdressed, but the children won't mind." The Alter Ego's brows knit together for a moment.*

*"The children... yes. I would be interested in meeting the children," he said and Douman wondered what he remembered of them. Well, it wasn't really his business.*

*"Ane, we have a guest," Douman called as he exited the workroom. His wife's voice floated back from the kitchen.*

*"It is no problem, there will be plenty." Excellent. Douman led his other self to the dining room, with the beautiful lacquered table and tatami mats. "Please, have a seat. I'll make us tea." There was a tea set in the dining room. Douman used a bit of magic to heat the water as his Alter Ego took a seat, settling his heavy robe in a beautiful display of silk. Then he glanced around the room curiously.*

*"Very cozy. This is where you normally took your meals?" Douman nodded, his attention on the tea as he measured out the leaves.*

*"Most days, except when there were feasts or I was required to attend to the Emperor." Then he and Ane ate at the palace and sometimes even took the children with them, depending on the occasion. "We have servants, as well." That should be obvious but Douman wasn't willing to take the Alter Ego's knowledge for granted. The stories of course did not record the minor details of running a small, but very prosperous household.*

*"I see." Douman patiently waited for the tea to steep before bringing it to the table. Then he poured them both tea. The Alter Ego hummed softly in pleasure as he sampled his, which made Douman pause for a moment because he knew he often did the same thing, when he tried very good tea. How strange, that a tiny gesture was the same.*

*The children came into the room, arguing about something and stopped dead when they saw the flamboyant stranger. If this had not been a dream they'd have had many questions about why they looked the same, but Douman didn't want that and with this being a lucid dream, he had control of it. So all they reacted to was his clothing.*

*"Who is this, oyaji?" His step-son asked and Douman gave him a mock scowl. The young man grinned back cheekily, his coppery red hair shining in the light.*

*"That kimono is so wonderful! It looks just like yours, papa." His daughter admired it and the Alter Ego looked at her. She gazed back fearlessly, to Douman's amusement but not surprise. Ah, these children knew so many fierce onmyouji and none fiercer than their own fathers. "Is this another priest?"*



*“Indeed, he was to meet the Emperor today but the meeting has been delayed, so he is staying with us tonight.” Douman said easily. “His name is Limbo.” They both stumbled a bit over the foreign name but accepted it readily enough. They both took a seat at the table and Ane brought in the meal with the help of a serving girl. Ah, a lovely big roasted fish with rice, pickled vegetables and condiments, how delicious! Ane settled by his side and Douman smiled at her. It felt so wonderful to do this again, even in a mere dream.*

*The meal passed with Douman chatting with his family and the Alter Ego mostly observing. They did include him sometimes – his daughter asked about the hat – but he seemed content to just watch. Douman didn’t mind, asking his son what mischief he’d gotten into. On a day like today, when Douman’s life was consumed with the Emperor’s needs, he normally just let the boy go have some fun. It turned out he’d spent the day at the river, practicing charms to try to lure fish close enough to tickle them. What a charming image and an excellent way to practice the spells. His daughter had spent most of her day on calligraphy and art, working on practicing her techniques on scraps of paper. Ane asked if she’d brought any home and she shyly shared a few small pieces, little sketches that nonetheless were quite beautiful to Douman’s eyes. Perhaps he was biased.*

*When the meal was done, Douman excused himself to take the Alter Ego to a room. Instead, they went outside. The sun was just beginning to set and the Alter Ego gazed over the small gardens attached to his home, the little stone path and the small shrine to the dead. (it was for the children. Douman wasn’t going to make an issue of it)*

*“Well, that was enlightening.” The Alter Ego said before turning to him. “You know the reason I didn’t insist on your death?” Douman met his eyes, saying nothing. “I think the final ingredient to make me a Beast might be you.” Pale lips pulled back from sharp teeth in an expression of disgust. “But I believe we are fundamentally incompatible.”*

*“Well, it depends on what you do. If you try to keep me undigested, within your Spirit Origin, I think my rage would gradually tear you to pieces.” Douman was sure that he would exist in a state of unceasing rebellion if the Alter Ego tried that. “You would need to completely absorb me, incorporate my Spirit Origin into your own... and adopt much of what I am for your own.” Douman tilted his head to one side, gazing at the Alter Ego curiously. “And that’s what you can’t stomach.” It would work, enhance Limbo’s power considerably, perhaps even give him the ultimate strength that he craved... but at the cost of a fundamental change.*

*“Yes. I have no desire to be so human.” Douman blinked at the loathing in his other self’s tone. It wasn’t that he hated humanity, exactly, but he hated... identifying with them? “I still cannot comprehend how someone like you gave rise to me.”*

*“Tch. You’ve seen me at my very worst. How do you think some random peasant would feel, seeing a wizard like me losing his temper?” Douman countered. “They would think me a demon enfleshed.” That was no doubt how this had started, he knew that, his reputation was fearsome. “I am feared and I would honestly say I deserve it. That’s enough.” Just the speck of dirt that would lead to a pearl. Limbo thought about it for a moment before nodding with a sigh.*

*“I suppose that is all it comes down to. Humans are so vexing... well, I will be on my way. You should enjoy yourself while you can.” What did that mean? Douman might have asked*

*but then his Alter Ego vanished, leaving him alone in the garden. Douman felt a sudden headache and grimacing, he reached up and pressed on his forehead. What...? Then he tasted stickily sweet alcohol and a terrible foulness, coating his mouth and remembered... the oni. They had fed him poison. He needed to wake up to cleanse it. Someone was shaking him and the dream was starting to break up, and he could feel his body, but it was disconnected and strange.*

*He needed to wake up!*

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Ritsuka dithered a bit in the caverns before grabbing the travel supplies Douman had put away and leaving, going back towards the Territory. It wasn't that she thought she could do anything, exactly, but she couldn't just leave Douman alone. Ritsuka could sense him in the back of her mind and knew he was in great pain. What were they going to do to him?

It was going to take an hour to get back, though, even moving as fast as she could. Ritsuka strengthened her limbs with magic and wondered what she would do when she got there. Plead with Limbo for Douman's life? Maybe she could offer him... something? Ritsuka shuddered a little at the thought but she couldn't leave Douman at their mercy. She just couldn't!

Fortunately, trying to reason with Limbo wasn't necessary. To Ritsuka's surprise, Ibaraki and Shuten met her on the way, Ibaraki carrying Douman like a sack on her back. As soon as she saw Ritsuka, the banana oni dumped Douman on the ground and Ritsuka winced at the way he hit the ground.

"Douman!" Ritsuka ran to him, heedless of the oni. The smell of sake was appalling. "Shuten, how much did you give him?" She shouldn't scold an enemy Servant, she really shouldn't, but Ritsuka knew exactly what this would do. "I know you can't remember being summoned by me but I know exactly what this does!" Thank god Siegfried had pried Fergus off her. Shuten was grinning ear to ear.

"Ohhohohoho! So you've seen me use it before on hot blooded men?" Ritsuka glared at her, knowing that was exactly how it worked... on any man with a deeply passionate nature, no matter how well hidden, it would inflame their lusts to an insane degree. Douman would certainly qualify. "Oh, don't be so mad! Enjoy yourself, he's a wonderful man." Shuten winked and Ritsuka couldn't stop a blush, feeling the heat on her cheeks.

"You'll need the mana anyway to cure the poison," Ibaraki muttered and Ritsuka involuntarily looked at Douman, evaluating his mana supply. Oh dear, it was very bad, all the damage had taken everything he had and... had someone been nibbling on him? Ritsuka turned a glare on Ibaraki. "Hey, I was hungry! We didn't have to give him back!"

"I know... thank you." Ritsuka really was thankful to have her Servant back, even if he was poisoned and bleeding all over the place. "...Why did you give him back?" That was rather odd. Shuten shrugged.

"I made a promise, and I want to see what he will do. Come Ibaraki, we should get back to our Master." Wait, they both had the same Master? Was it an oni? Ritsuka wanted to ask but

they were already leaving and she needed to do something with Douman but... what?

“Douman, wake up!” Ritsuka shook his shoulders but he only mumbled, eyelids flickering. “...” Ritsuka bit her lip. This wasn’t... quite how she’d wanted to do this but... it was what she needed to do and what she’d been WANTING to do so...

Taking a deep breath, Ritsuka began disrobing her Servant. She gently tugged off his little familiars, who didn’t seem to mind, and set them in a pile beside him. Then she undid his obi, setting his pouch and intro aside, before tugging down his hakama. To her surprise, he was wearing no underthings and Ritsuka gazed at what was revealed. *Oh my. He’s fully proportional.* And Douman was so tall, which made him intimidatingly large. Ritsuka blushed as she saw that his pubic patch was also black and white striped. That hair color was natural?

Trying not to get distracted, Ritsuka pulled a marker out of her pocket. It was a special enchanted marker that her mother had made for her a long, long time ago. She’d managed to keep it through all the Singularities and used it for multiple rituals and, just once, this exact same ritual. Taking a deep breath, Ritsuka began drawing on Douman’s skin. A pattern on the chest and the belly... wow, just drawing this was pretty arousing... Ritsuka missed Douman raising his head groggily and looking down at her work, tilting his head in a confused state before grinning widely.

Ritsuka had just finished taking off her pants and was undoing the buckles of her shirt when her Servant surprised her. Douman suddenly surged off the ground and knocked her down, which might have hurt a LOT, but he also cushioned her fall perfectly and Ritsuka’s head came to rest on his forearm and not the hard ground. She stared, wide eyed, into black eyes that were glowing red with a heat that wasn’t rage.

“Forgive me, Master, but I would never let a lady do all the work.” Douman’s voice was full of hot lust and Ritsuka swallowed hard. “I hate this stupid zipper... but...” Douman’s lips gripped the Chaldea’ insignia and Ritsuka gasped as he pulled down the zipper, opening her shirt. He pulled it all the way down, letting the fabric part before moving back up. Ritsuka shivered as dark nails scraped her skin, then gasped as he grasped her breast, his breath hot on her skin. Then he tugged her nipple into his mouth and Ritsuka arched.

“D-Douman...!” Her hand tangled in his hair and Ritsuka noticed something very strange... the white parts were soft as silk but the black was rough and wild, like a wild cat’s pelt. And his mouth felt so good, his tongue making her breast tingle and her body feel wet. Douman let go with a lewd pop and Ritsuka gasped at the sudden chill on the wet skin.

“So beautiful. Ah, Ritsuka.” His nail scraped over her nipple, an odd, teasing sensation before he kissed her. Ritsuka could taste the sake on his breath and it was wonderful, as he slowly and lovingly kissed her. The way his body felt against her, the hard muscles and the heat of his breath as he explored her throat... she felt like she was melting into the sensations.

“Douman... I...” Ritsuka gasped as he sucked on her throat, arching up against him in a mute plea. She could feel his erection against her belly, it was so big and she wanted it somewhere else! Douman breathed in her ear.

“I wanted to be sure you were ready but since we are...” He moved slightly, adjusting before pushing into her in one smooth move. Ritsuka gasped and her eyes watered at the almost painful sensation. He was so large, he filled her so completely, it was good but it hurt! “I know, it takes a bit of getting used to.” Oh you!

“Smug...” Ritsuka gasped and heard Douman chuckle before moving. The pleasure intensified as the pain began to fade, her body adapting to his size. Ritsuka kissed him again, feeling deeply connected to him in so many ways. Oh, this all felt so good!

As Douman took her, he began muttering and Ritsuka realized, in the haze of pleasure, that he was using the symbols she’d drawn as a focal point. He was enhancing the spell? Yes, but not to draw more energy from her, he was calling upon nature and fecundity in general... Ritsuka gasped as his nails scraped her skin as his cock pressed in very hard, sending a jolt of pure pleasure to her brain. Ah, what had she been thinking about? It didn’t matter, nothing mattered except what they were doing.

Ritsuka felt her orgasm approaching and dug her nails into Douman’s shoulders, clinging to him as every thrust brought her a little closer, just a little closer. Then she went over the edge and cried out, almost blacking out at the intensity of it. Stars flashed behind her eyes as Douman surged against her, a few urgent thrusts before he cried out hoarsely. The shared moment of pleasure was blinding but Ritsuka still sensed a surge of mana, far beyond what that ritual SHOULD have generated. Ah, what had Douman done? He’d enhanced it to incredible levels!

When it was over Ritsuka was left gasping, spent and boneless. Douman didn’t pull away from her immediately, muttering more spells... Ritsuka realized after a confused moment that he was purging himself of the poisoned sake. Oh good, that was what they’d needed this for... Douman’s hand gently stroked her hair and Ritsuka nuzzled his hand, feeling incredibly tired.

“Ah, Ritsuka... take a short rest. I will take care of you.” Yes... a rest sounded... perfect... Ritsuka let herself drift away into a light sleep.

Douman would be fine now.

## Chapter 10

Caster of Limbo, Ashiya Douman, gazed upon his fiery domain and quietly thought.

*Humans are so small and filthy. So weak and helpless. How could even an exceptional human have given rise to me?* His “true self” was exceptional, Douman would grant that. Fighting with his body as much as his magic, the revelation about his paternity and then that revenge he had planned for Abe no Seimei. Despite being so depressingly mundane, it was also surprisingly sadistic. Overall, Limbo was impressed, but it still didn’t seem like enough.

Talking with his other self hadn’t given Limbo the greatest insight into his own true nature. No, that had been the children. When Douman had brought them up, Limbo had been intrigued as he realized he couldn’t really remember the children at all. They were like a blank spot in his memory, something he’d known must have been there but like... tapestry images. And as he saw the real thing, Limbo had realized, more than ever, that he was incomplete.

*Is this truly what I need?* Douman’s lips skinned back from his teeth in a feral snarl. *These tiny human things?* The girl’s calligraphy and the boy catching fish? And the woman, the wife... she wasn’t the person he remembered at all. Limbo remembered a beautiful but rather silly woman that he’d charmed into letting her guard down. The woman his “true self” had married was beautiful but aged, and Limbo had noticed her intelligence, even in just one dinner. Had things truly played out as he remembered? Limbo doubted it. *Is this truly what I need to be whole?*

“Filthy, filthy, *filthy*,” Douman hissed, rejecting the idea. He would not accept it. He COULD NOT accept it! “I will become a Beast and I do not need a human to do it! I will show you, my “true self” the power that I hold! You will stand before me when I am a true Beast!” Limbo swept away, intending to check the Tree of Emptiness for progress.

And he carefully ignored the tiny speck of doubt in his heart.

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Douman smiled as he watched Ritsuka sleep. She was curled on her side now, dead to the world as she snored cutely. She was also drooling a little, how adorable. He created a warm blanket and tucked it around her, to protect her from errant breezes.

*I should make some food for when she wakes.* Ritsuka would be famished from all the exertion. Looking around, Douman spotted the discarded travel bag. Ah, perfect. Quickly sorting through it he pulled out the bag of rice and dried fish. He could make something quite edible with this.

It didn’t take Douman long to start a fire and get the rice cooking. As he stirred the pot, he considered what had just happened. It had all gone rather fast, not surprising given his condition but Douman was just glad he hadn’t hurt Ritsuka. Normally he would give a new lover more preparation than that, to make sure they were ready for his size. Douman knew he was exceptionally large. Even his very first lover, a highly experienced courtesan hired by his

mentor, had mentioned it. It couldn't help but make him feel a little smug, although Douman knew it was only an accident of birth.

That thought took away even the slightest pleasure, though, as Douman thought about what the oni woman had told him. *Did my mother lie to me?* To his surprise – his mother had been dead over thirty years! – the thought brought a stab of pain to his heart. Was it likely, though? Or had his father been a god or oni disguised as a tinker? Trying to decide, Douman sorted through his recollections of his mother.

Douman's mother had been a rather silly girl, the sixth child of a poor farming family and an ugly duckling as a child. She had fallen to the wiles of a travelling tinker and ended up pregnant with her son. Her family had cast her out and his mother had travelled to the local noble family to beg for a place. At that moment in her life, she had been very lucky... five of the staff and one of the noble family had all been claimed by an untimely fever. They'd been willing to take a chance on a random pregnant girl. Douman could remember the manor a bit... they'd lived there until he was six.

The problem had happened because his mother was genuinely a silly girl. She'd taken to thieving little bits of food from the kitchen, justifying it as for her son. Which was true, she shared it, but Douman also knew anything sweet didn't make it to him. Still, it was a minor offense... until the day the jade combs had gone missing. His mother had denied any responsibility but her history of thefts had been brought up and she'd lost her place.

(Douman knew, from spells he'd done much later, that the combs had actually been taken by the youngest daughter of the house and accidentally dropped into the koi pond. He'd forgiven her, since she'd only been seven years old at the time and terrified that her father would beat her for the expensive loss)

They had made their way to the inn where Douman had finished his childhood. In that inn, his mother had gone from a young woman with slightly sticky fingers to a genuine thief. The innkeeper had largely been behind it, teaching her how to pick her targets, how to seduce and steal and taking a cut of the take. It had all worked extremely well, largely due to the innkeeper's canny target selection. Only strangers and not particularly prosperous ones, who wouldn't be able to get much interest from the mayor. Sometimes his mother had come up dry, of course – quite a few of them were too wary to give her an opportunity – but there was always a fool or two.

Considering all that, and what he knew of his mother's character, Douman tried to decide if she had lied to him. After a long moment of thought, Douman decided it was possible but unlikely. It seemed more like his mother to whisper his true origins in his ear, to keep his spirits up when life in the village was hard and to give him comfort that a great future was in store. And with this knowledge, Douman knew that future had always been certain. If that wandering onmyouji hadn't happened by, what would he have become? A martial artist? A warrior? Or even a powerful criminal, the kind that could make even noble houses shake in fear? That actually seemed likely...

Shaking the thought away – Douman was more than happy with his life as a wizard – he went back to the main question. His father. Assuming his mother had not known, who had his father been and why had he been disguising himself as a tinker? Why had he bedded a

random farm girl? Just lust, or was there something more to it? With the clarity of hindsight, Douman wanted to kick himself. Why had he never used his magic to investigate his father? The thought had not once occurred to him!

*I'll probably never know what was behind it.* That was frustrating but Douman wasn't going to spend any strength on something so frivolous. Hmm, was the rice done? Yes, it was looking nice and fluffy. He decanted it into a serving dish and used a small spell to keep it warm before starting on the soup. A simple dashi would be good, yes.

"Oh... Douman?" Ritsuka muttered as she stirred before sitting up. Douman glanced over and happened to get a beautiful view of her exposed breasts. "OH!" Ritsuka immediately began zipping herself up and tucking herself in, to his disappointment. "My pants..." She pushed the blanket aside, finding her discarded clothing as Douman ladled out the soup into bowls.

"I have lunch ready, Master." It was about that time anyway. Ritsuka's stomach audibly growled, to his amusement. "It's nothing fancy, just rice and soup but more than edible." Fresh fish would have made it better.

"Oh, thank you so much, I'm so hungry!" Yes, that was to be expected. Ritsuka joined him by the fire and picked up a bowl, serving herself a healthy portion of rice. Douman offered her a bowl of soup, taking nothing but a bowl of soup for himself, adding a bit of rice to it for flavor. They both ate in silence for a while but when the first edge of hunger was gone, Ritsuka spoke. "Douman... what do we do now?" She sounded lost, likely because she could think of no good options. That had to be demoralizing for a Master.

"Well, I do have a plan for this," Douman said slowly, considering how to sell it. He actually thought it was a rather good plan, although it was extremely... arrogant? It would certainly require that they approach it with supreme confidence, whatever doubts they might carry. "I want us to travel to the Emperor's court. It will take roughly four days." It was only that short because they were rather lucky... two days of travel would bring them to a town on the river that should have a ferry service, and two more days would get them to the capital. "Then, you will challenge Abe no Seimei to a duel of magic."

"What???" Ritsuka squeaked, almost dropping her rice. Douman immediately moved to explain.

"Master, your mage circuits may be almost nothing but it doesn't matter when your magic is ME." It was important that she understand this. "I am essentially your shikigami and summoning a spirit like myself in such a capacity is an impressive feat of magic, indeed."

"But that's not MY magic, it's –" Ritsuka started but Douman sharply cut her off.

"That doesn't matter. You are the inheritor of this magic, like any magus would accept a Mage Crest from a parent. Even if there are technicalities surrounding it, they would matter not at all to an onmyouji." Truly, Ritsuka's ability to summon and work with her Servants was like a Mage Crest. Ritsuka swallowed hard and Douman felt a bit of doubt. This would depend so much on her to work! "I will outfit you with the very finest court raiment, do your hair and makeup. You will need to be completely confident as you issue the challenge. The

court are like wolves, scenting weakness,” Douman warned her and Ritsuka swallowed again before frowning.

“But Douman, how can you win?” Ritsuka asked and Douman smiled before slowly grinning. He knew it looked wicked and Ritsuka suddenly seemed to think she might have offended him. “Not that I’m doubting you!”

“There is no offense taken. Master, you have summoned me at the peak of my power, after I took Abe no Seimei’s spellbook. I am confident I can win the first trial.” He also planned to incorporate that strange knowledge he’d been given, when he’d reached that “Da Vinci” person. “I am less confident I can win the second trial... and I can’t win the third at all, unless we change it up.” This was where his plan got extremely shaky. “After you issue the challenge, I will take over and plainly own up to the fact that my Clairvoyance is horrendous.” That would amuse Abe no Seimei and make him more likely to accept the next suggestion. “And then I will propose that the last challenge be a simple roll of the dice.”

“Uh... you... plan to magic the dice?” Ritsuka asked tentatively, but Douman shook his head.

“No, that would be caught. It will be fairly decided by chance.” Of course, that meant the outcome was literally fifty/fifty chance. However. “If we lose, I have a plan... I want you to beg Abe no Seimei, as prettily as you can, for access to his sanctum for the casting of a single spell.”

“Oh!” Ritsuka sounded like she’d just had a revelation. “That’s why you want to do this! So we can reach the Shadow Border!” Oh, he hadn’t mentioned that, how stupid of him.

“Yes indeed. I came close with just our pitiful ley line nexus. With Abe no Seimei’s workshop at my disposal, I will make full contact.” Douman was confident of that. “I will bring this Mash person, and summon more Servants. We will have our own army at our disposal... but to do it, I need Abe no Seimei’s workshop.” That was the mountain he needed to stand upon.

“Yes, I’ll do it!” Ritsuka suddenly caught fire and Douman felt amused as he realized all she needed was the prospect of seeing Mash again. ...Hmmm...

“Master, can you tell me about Mash? Is this a woman or a man?” Douman said with a perfectly casual tone, hiding that the answer mattered to him. Although it was foolish, what did it matter if he had a rival when he could stay such a short time?

“Oh, Mash is a girl. She’s my best friend.” Excellent. “She’s been with me through absolutely everything, I can tell you more about her when we travel if you want.” Ah, yes, they were talking too much and the rice was getting cold.

“Certainly, I would enjoy that,” Douman said easily. The bare bones recount she’d already given him of her adventures was impressive, he was sure the fleshed out version would be incredible. And if this Mash girl had been with her the entire time, she was surely a force to be reckoned with. Douman tidied up a little, putting out the fire and placing the remaining rice in a conjured pouch for later, tucking it into his bag. Ritsuka finished her rice and he vanished the plates and cutlery. Then, they were on their way. Ah, so much travelling, but at



least they had a good destination in mind! Douman thought there was nothing worse than looking for something when you had no idea where it might be.

Knowing where you were going made it so much easier to put one food in front of another.

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Ritsuka felt wonderful and refreshed as she walked beside Douman, taking the road towards the town that could take them to the capital. As they walked, she thought about what had happened.

*That was short, but wonderful.* Ritsuka blushed a little as she snuck a glance at Douman. ... *Will he want to do it again?* She would love to when he wasn't completely lost on Shuten's drugs, and they could take things a bit more slowly. But... well... did he? Ritsuka finally took her courage into her hands and popped the question

"Douman, um... when we have a chance... would you like to do that again?" She asked.

"Of course." Douman gave her a smile that warmed her to her toes. Lustful and promising, in equal measure. "I would love to do that in a better setting, with a few... accoutrements." The way he said that! Although, what did that mean?

"Oh, do you mean magic?" Ritsuka said hopefully. She'd heard a few rumors about sexual magics but Douman's smile turned into a frown.

"Hm... Master, how much do you know about such magic?" Douman's tone was oddly neutral and Ritsuka gulped internally. Had she said something stupid? But there was nothing to do but own up to it, if she had.

"Nothing really, just the spell I used on you. Da Vinci taught me that," Ritsuka said, reflecting on it. Da Vinci had given her the lesson in private and strongly advised her to memorize the pattern and practice it because if she needed it, she would need it urgently. "I've only used it once before." Siegfried... Ritsuka blushed a little as she remembered. It had been in Septem and she had made some rookie mistakes.

"Hmm, so I have a rival? Interesting." Douman's tone held his usual, mocking note but Ritsuka didn't miss the subtle undertones of real malice. She had no doubt at all that he would plot to remove a real rival.

"Oh no, not at all! That was Siegfried... he was really nice about it but we don't feel that way about each other at all." And she did feel that way about Douman. Ritsuka swallowed, looking down. She wasn't stupid, she knew she could only be with Douman for the length of the Singularity. And yet... he was really attractive to her in a way most Servants weren't. Why was that? It wasn't just physical... then a soft chuckle took her mind off that thought.

"Ah, my apologies Master. I am quite possessive, when I truly want something." Ritsuka blushed a little at the thought that her Servant wanted her as much as she wanted him. "Hmm, to return to the original topic... tantric magics are actually quite dangerous." Huh?!? "They also often fail to get passed down to female practitioners, especially. Parental prudery and male teachers." Douman sounded disgusted. "Tch, I consider it criminal... even if the fools

don't want to teach girls the spells, they should at least explain the inherent problems!" Douman really hated stupidity, Ritsuka had noticed. And he admired cleverness, even when it caused him problems, like the time that shopkeeper had really gotten him bargaining.

"What are the problems?" Ritsuka prompted, really curious. Douman glanced up at the sun, frowning a bit before responding.

"Like all dangerous magics, tantric spells have a place. They are a godsend to those cursed with impotence or extreme frigidity. However... they are also addictive." Ohhh. "Because they can affect the body in such a... primordial way, it is possible for an unscrupulous wizard to use them to create dependence in an unwitting victim." ...Ew! "Also, they are prone to abuse by the practitioner. I know onmyouji who cannot function at all without the aide of such spells."

"Oh, it's like a really bad porn addiction then," Ritsuka said and Douman cocked his head to one side, taking on the preoccupied look he got when communing with the Grail. Then he blinked and looked at her.

"Yes, precisely. Hm, I never considered that mere pornography could also cause such an effect. Troubling," Douman said, sounding very thoughtful. "Of course, we only have hand drawn illustrations here and they are quite expensive. A future where such things are cheap and plentiful... interesting."

"I think you would really like the modern era." And Ritsuka could picture Douman there... somehow, her mind conjured an image of him as a teacher, wearing comfortable slacks and a dress shirt, undone just a bit to show his chest. And glasses, he would be wearing glasses... Ritsuka almost giggled as she imagined how the students would react to him. There would be so many crushes! "You know, I think you would be a great teacher." He was always able to explain things so clearly.

"Mmm, do you think so? It's always so hard to know... I had three apprentices, in the course of my life, and only one of them went on to great things." Douman tapped his nails together for a moment. "Although I never chose them for their mage circuits, merely their willingness to learn... one boy had mage circuits barely better than your own, in fact. I remember, his father accosted me in the market and begged me to teach his boy... the child had somehow spontaneously awakened and was constantly breaking things." Douman sounded amused and Ritsuka was a bit amazed that the father had been so brave, taking on Douman that way. "I was impressed with his wits and spirit, so I agreed. The child was an apt pupil, within his abilities and went on to a good life as a village onmyouji."

"That's wonderful," Ritsuka said warmly before stopping and impulsively hugging him. Ah, he was so tall compared to her! Douman made a surprised sound before chuckling and patting her on the shoulder.

"I did think that would interest you. But please tell me about Mash. I'm curious to know more about your friends and companions." Oh right! Ritsuka let go of him and began telling him more about Mash and Da Vinci... and also Dr. Romani, although it still hurt a bit to talk about him. It felt like just yesterday that she'd caught him sleeping in the control room, drooling a bit on the controls. Ah, just talking about it made her feel sad and nostalgic.

Despite all they'd gone through saving Humanity, Ritsuka really missed Chaldea.

## Chapter 11

*Several days later*

Douman tapped his nails together as he gazed over the docks. He didn't really see the cargo ships, the bustling activity as they were loaded and unloaded to continue their trips to and from the capital. Instead, he pondered the information he'd just been given.

*There is no ferry ship in right now, only cargo haulers.* They COULD catch a ride on a cargo ship, but it would not be pleasant. They would likely have to bunk with the crew or even on the deck. There would be no privacy at all, which was highly annoying. Not only did Douman have intimate designs on his Master, he wanted to create various 'looks' for her and come up with the perfect ensemble for the imperial court. She couldn't change into them in the open! Time was of the essence though. Hmmm. *The clear advantage to taking the cargo ship is time.* They would save a day of waiting. *The advantage of waiting is better accommodations and an area we can be intimate and practice magic in.* Not to mention that they would be able to spend a night at the town's inn. This was a highly prosperous place and Douman was certain he could find many victims for his curse, as well as a very lovely place to spend the night. And they had arrived quite early so he could get some special supplies.

"I got everything!" Douman turned to see Ritsuka beaming, carrying savory items on sticks. Ah, chicken and squid, excellent. "Is there a good place to sit?"

"Yes, right over here." Douman motioned towards a pair of barrels. "Hold those for a moment and I'll give you a boost." It would be very difficult for Ritsuka to get atop them holding her food, otherwise. They both went to the barrels and Douman gently boosted her up before taking a seat on his own barrel and accepting his share of the food. It gave them a wonderful vantage point, to watch all the bustle of the docks. Douman bit into the yakitori and found it was seasoned with mustard and shiso, nice and tender. They both ate quietly for a bit... Douman finished his first chicken skewer before speaking.

"Master, there is no ferry ship in right now. If we want to leave right now, we'll have to take a cargo hauler," Douman said, making up his own mind. "I recommend waiting for the ferry. It will cost us a day, but we'll have better food, accommodations and privacy, which will be valuable to prepare." He very much hoped Ritsuka agreed. If not, Douman would concede and follow her lead.

"Okay, that sounds good." Ah, it did? Douman didn't mean to betray his surprise but knew he had, when Ritsuka smiled brightly. "I've taken a cargo hauler before and it was really awful, the smell of fish was stuck to me for DAYS! We can't show up at the Imperial court smelling like that, can you imagine?" HAH! Although he could easily take care of that with a bit of magic. Not to mention.

"Since the cargo ships are coming from the interior of Japan and going towards the coast, hauls of fish are less likely than metal, silk and foodstuffs. But the cargo ships are not pleasant, no matter the circumstances." Douman remarked before trying the squid. Hmm, a

bit chewy, it hadn't been marinated enough. Still quite acceptable but not as good as the chicken.

"Well, the privacy thing is more valuable than the time. We need to rehearse what I'm going to say," Ritsuka said before biting into her own squid. Douman nodded, his mouth full.

"Mmm, yes, we should prepare carefully." Douman was feeling better about his own decision, now. He'd been carrying a bit of doubt, wondering if he was favoring it because of the intimate time with Ritsuka. But they couldn't afford to flub it with the court, the privacy to prepare and practice really was worth the time.

They finished lunch, before leaving the docks in search of prey for Douman and some heavy shopping. Douman picked the richest victims he could, aware he would need every penny, before searching for the right shop.

"Douman? What do we need here?" Ritsuka asked quietly as they stepped into a very expensive little shop. It was well lit, with fine windows and silk draperies. A very feminine shop that carried the finest kimono and all the accessories. There were currently several girls trying on new kimono and keeping the shop keeper busy, which suited Douman well.

"We need cosmetics and fragrance, Master," Douman said, glancing around and then going towards the makeup. The rice powders, the ground metals and the slightly magical dustings that would fix them in place. "While I can make these with my magic, they can also be dispelled. And while no one would be rude enough to dispel your clothing, there is certainly someone *imbecilic* enough to dispel your makeup at the worst possible time."

"Oh!" Ritsuka muttered something and all Douman caught was the word "Merlin". Well, idiots did love their little jokes.

"We'll still use my fakes to practice, to perfect the look we want, but we'll need the real thing. So..." Douman began comparing them to Ritsuka's skin tone, looking for a good match. It was really fairly easy. Ritsuka was very fair but that was good with the rice powders, where the fashion was to be as pale as possible. The other dustings were a bit trickier and they ended up getting quite an assortment. "Now, the fragrances..." This might be going a bit far, they didn't really need it, but Douman had trouble creating even fake fragrances. Woman's perfumes had never interested him in life and Ane had rarely worn them.

The shop keeper came to help them as they were exploring the fragrances and Douman stood back and let her assist Ritsuka. When they finished Douman tried to bargain but it was difficult when he didn't know the price of anything. Resigning himself to overpaying, Douman parted with a great deal of his stolen riches, reflecting irritably on the fact that none of it would be necessary if not for a certain half-kitsune asshole... When that was done, Douman cast a few spells on the cosmetics and fragrance, sealing them and strengthening the containers so they would not spill or break. Then he put them away in the travel bag.

"Master, do we have time to visit the apothecary?" Douman asked, glancing up at the sky. "I believe it is a relatively short walk from here." Still, it would be quite late by the time they got to the hospitality district. Douman hadn't secured a room at the inn yet.

“It’s fine, you need reagents for your spells?” Ritsuka asked and Douman nodded.

“Yes indeed.” For a lesser spell, his fake reagents would be sufficient but not for something meant for Abe no Seimei. Douman couldn’t afford even the slightest downrank in his spells. Although he could easily get them in the capital but... “I also want a few other things.” A certain cream and an oil, if they were available. Douman smiled a bit to himself. Ah, he had plans for those.

“Okay, let’s go then.” Ah, Ritsuka was completely oblivious to his thoughts. Douman quickly checked his map before setting off, his Master following behind.

The apothecary was even closer than he thought, only a few blocks away and Douman was soon sorting through reagents, carefully sniffing and testing the quality. Even poor quality would affect the spell and it was not unknown for apothecaries to even pull a few substitutions. Fortunately all the ingredients were adequate and he took generous amounts. The cream and the oil were also available and Douman took jars of each without comment. Ritsuka would see what these were for later.

After the apothecary, it was time to find an inn. Fortunately there were several choices and they all had room and soon they had put away their belongings before settling in for supper. The inn had only one thing available, braised pork and rice, but it was good. Douman sampled the tea and felt slightly disappointed. It was fine, but the tea leaves were particularly bland, without any kind of character.

“This is my least favorite tea. Moderately priced and meant to offend no one,” Douman remarked, going back to the food. “I would prefer a cheaper but more interesting blend.” But then, there were few botanicals that he disliked.

“Mmm, I see what you mean. It’s fine with the food though,” Ritsuka said before taking another mouthful. Douman nodded, taking more of his own. “Douman... I think I forgot to tell you something.” Eh? “I think Shuten and Ibaraki have the same Master.” The two oni... wait, what? Douman froze as a suspicion came to him. But surely it couldn’t be correct! “Douman?”

*Master, I believe we should communicate silently.* Douman switched to mental communication and saw Ritsuka frown, her food momentarily forgotten. *I suddenly wonder if we are walking into a trap.* Surely not though. Surely his doppelganger could not be so foolish! Ritsuka’s eyes widened as she caught his thoughts.

*You think that Abe no Seimei could be their Master?* Douman hesitated, considering it. *Why didn’t you mention this before?* Douman could feel Ritsuka beginning to get upset with him. But he had a good answer to that.

*Until you mentioned one person having two Servants, I did not consider it a possibility.* Douman answered as Ritsuka frowned. *My cursed doppelganger would have to be an absolute lunatic to allow Seimei anywhere near the Grail War. Seimei is utterly untrustworthy in every aspect but also incredibly powerful. Allowing such a wild card to become part of the Grail system is sheer lunacy!* Douman could not fathom Limbo making a mistake of that magnitude. *However, very few living in this era could sustain two Servants and he is*

*definitely one of them. Yet, surely not!* If Douman was somehow wrong and Limbo had allowed *Abe no Seimei* to take two Class cards, Douman would strangle the fool with his bare hands.

*What would you have done in Limbo's place?* Hmm. That was an interesting question. Douman considered it for a moment as they quietly ate.

*I would have done everything in my power to keep Abe no Seimei ignorant of the Grail War and failing that, have multiple contingency plans in place to convince him he does not want to participate,* Douman said after a long moment's thought. *It would depend how much power I had at my disposal. If I could generate an illusion so powerful and flawless that Seimei could not penetrate it, I could keep him truly ignorant of the situation.* That would be ideal but also extremely difficult. Still, with the power his doppelganger had from the triple spirit origin and the Tree of Emptiness, he could presumably have done it. *Beyond that, if he became aware of the situation, I would lock away the Grail from him and subtly threaten the Imperial Court while assuring him that I had no true designs on Japan. Seimei was loyal to the Emperor, if only for his own ends. Given the danger of trying to participate without a Servant, that might be enough. I would of course monitor him closely for any sign of trouble.* In Limbo's place, Douman would consider Abe no Seimei to be a threat potentially greater than Chaldea. It would be his top priority to make sure that threat never materialized. *I would also make plans for how to eliminate him if he started becoming adventurous.* Douman would probably keep the Assassin card and try to summon a Servant particularly noted for magus killing.

*You're afraid that Limbo just wouldn't take Abe no Seimei as seriously as you would.* Ritsuka observed and Douman nodded with a soft sigh.

*I very much fear that his partial existence as a legend has distorted his understanding of the true Abe no Seimei. He is "evil" so Seimei is "good" and nothing could be further from the truth,* Douman said before taking a bite of his food. It really was too good to go to waste. *Still, I think he would be INSANE to let Seimei take two Class Cards. Overall, I think we are safe enough.* They both ate in silence for a moment as Ritsuka mulled it over.

*Well, we really don't have time to come up with another plan. We'll just have to keep our eyes open for any sign of trouble.* That was true, time really was of the essence now. *I'm a bit surprised no one else has attacked us yet.*

"I do think that is highly suspicious," Douman said aloud, taking a sip of his tea. "I suspect the Grail War is already almost over." Not a pleasant thought, because it meant his Alter-Ego had almost filled the cup. "Those two oni may be the only other Servants active."

"If that's true, we really don't have much time left. I wonder if we should have taken the hauler?" Ritsuka shook her head, her eyes troubled as she gazed into her tea. "Well, it's too late now." Yes, Douman knew that feeling.

When the meal was done they declined a sweet before going to their rooms. It was a very pleasant room with a single large bed, which suited their needs perfectly. Douman smiled as he reached into his bag for the two jars he'd purchased at the apothecary. Opening the first he caught the aroma of rosewater, ah, how pleasant.

“Douman? What is that?” Douman looked up as Ritsuka gazed at him curiously. Flicking a finger he dispelled her kimono, making her squeak in surprise. Although it just revealed that wretched uniform. Oh well.

“It’s a cream, highly suitable for massages,” Douman said pleasantly before glancing at his nails. Hmm, perhaps a bit shorter? A bit of concentration and they were completely square, suitable for what he wanted. “Would you care to disrobe, Master?” He asked in his best sensual tone. Ritsuka’s eyes were wide as she nodded, reaching for that horrible zipper.

As Ritsuka disrobed, Douman cast a gentle charm on the bed to warm it and also created a few towels. Soon enough Ritsuka was lying on her belly and Douman devoted himself to pleasing her, enjoying every moment as he worked the tension out of her muscles. He was good at this, so good that he could have made a career of it if his life had gone a different way.

“Douman... I was wondering... is your hair color natural?” Ritsuka murmured before shuddering a bit as he worked out a particularly stubborn knot. And that was an interesting question.

“Partly. My hair is naturally black but parts of it began to thin and turn white, when I was still quite young.” Douman had a theory as to why, but there was no need to mention that. It mattered not at all now that he was dead. “I decided to make the best of it and used spells to keep the white areas tolerably thick.” Without that, he would have been going bald and Douman did not care for that thought at all.

“Oh... you know, you would look good bald,” Ritsuka murmured and Douman grinned to himself. Yes, he would, but it just wasn’t his style. “Is your skin tone natural too?” Douman continued his massage, giving it most of his attention as he answered.

“Yes and no. Parts of my skin began to turn white, creating a terrible look. I decided to whiten everything, to look more dramatic.” It hadn’t really been the best look for a man, who were supposed to be tanned by the sun, but Onmyouji weren’t warriors so it had been acceptable. There was a long period of silence and Douman could sense Ritsuka mulling it over in her mind.

“We have a word for that you know.” Eh? “It’s called vitiligo... Douman, were you sick?” Douman’s hands paused for a moment as he stared at Ritsuka’s back. He really hadn’t expected her to make that connection!

“My Master is as intelligent as she is beautiful,” Douman purred before moving down her body to massage her calves. Ritsuka’s gasp was music to his ears. “It won’t matter to you, Ritsuka – I know you have a mage crest –” And a very fine one too, although her weak circuits meant she would never fully access it. “But my fate should be a lesson to all first generation magi. Creating a mage crest the wrong way can have terrible effects. I warned my stepson not to follow in my footsteps.”

“I see. That’s why you never had children of your own.” Ah, so perceptive. Painfully so. Ritsuka stirred and sat up, concern on her face as she felt the echo of pain in his heart. “Oh Douman, I’m sorry.” Douman waved it away.



“No, I suspect you’re right. I never confirmed it.” He’d wanted to maintain hope although marrying Ane, who was close to too old for such things, and adopting his rival’s children had been an admission of defeat. “Would you lie down on your back, Master?” He could do more to please her. Ritsuka nodded and settled back as Douman renewed the charm on the bed before reaching for the cream again.

This time, his massage was more sensual, targeting more to arousing her than soothing aches and pains. That slowly moved them to true lovemaking and Douman took his time, exploring every inch of her body with his hands and mouth. Then Ritsuka was returning the favor and they kissed, delving deeply into each other as Douman held Ritsuka close, feeling her soft, warm curves. Ah, this was so arousing!

He needed the second jar though. Reaching for it blindly, Douman found it and opened it before carefully gathering the contents. Ritsuka made a surprised sound followed by a sharp gasp as he smeared a bit of it on her nipples.

“Do you like that Master? This is the strongest tantric spell I will use... a rather common oil that causes the skin to tingle.” Village onmyouji made and sold it. It was typically a best seller. Douman smiled as he saw the lust on her face. Then he coated his own cock in it, gasping at the sensation. It would ebb fairly quickly, but it was still so arousing!

Douman settled between her thighs, sliding smoothly into her body. Ritsuka’s gasp of pleasure was music to his ears and her legs gripped him tightly as he slowly began to thrust. Douman took it slowly, savoring every moment as he enjoyed the sensation of making love to a woman again. Ritsuka was beautifully pliant in his arms, her eyes hazed with pleasure at the sensations.

“Douman... oh...” Ritsuka’s hand tangled in his hair, pulling him close for another kiss. They kissed deeply, passionately, as their bodies moved together.

It took a very long time, as Douman had planned. He brought Ritsuka close to orgasm but then pulled it back, not once but twice. She muttered complaints the second time and he kissed them away before whispering soft nothings in her ear. The third time Douman devoted himself fully to it and they came together in a moment of mutual pleasure that was awe inspiring. Also, perhaps a bit loud as Douman heard someone above them bang sharply on the floor.

“Ooops.” He’d forgotten an enchantment to muffle the noise, how stupid and inconsiderate of him. Douman sent the person above them mental apologies as Ritsuka cuddled against him.

“Huh? ...Oh, we made them mad.” Ritsuka muttered and Douman nodded before shrugging as he pulled away.

“It can’t be helped. Hopefully we won’t be charged for disturbing them.” If the innkeeper tried to make them pay, Douman would accept the blame but bargain a bit. It wasn’t as though they’d done it on purpose, after all. “Sleep, Master.” Douman murmured before gently kissing her on the cheek. Ritsuka curled up beside him, following his instruction and Douman soon joined her for a deep and dreamless sleep.

Author's note: Next chapter, Abe no Seimei!

## Chapter 12

Ritsuka woke up in the morning alone in bed. It was warm and comfortable and didn't bother her the way it might have with someone else... Douman was an early riser, that was just how he was. Ritsuka was sure if they were living together in an ordinary home living an ordinary life, he would already have breakfast ready.

*Why do I like him so much?* Ritsuka wondered as she cuddled into her pillow, still feeling a bit tired. *It's strange, isn't it?* She'd met so many men in Chaldeas. Very attractive men from a wide variety of backgrounds, and many who were available. Many who were fundamentally good people, too, which Douman was not. *What attracts me to him so strongly?* Ritsuka closed her eyes, thinking about it as she almost dozed off.

*He reminds me of my mom,* Ritsuka realized. It was strange to think since they were physically so disparate, but Douman was a lot like her mother. A powerful magus, very devoted to the craft... yet still seeing outside of it and showing compassion for those less fortunate. *Romani couldn't understand what it was like.* He'd often praised her for being an "amateur" and said it was good she wasn't a "real magus". Ritsuka had never corrected him but the thing was, she'd always wanted to be a magus. Not a cold-hearted snake, no, but a magus like her mother and it had hurt that she just couldn't be. She was like a child at the window of a candy shop looking in. *Douman would understand.* In his day and age, someone like her still had a place in the magus community, since everyone knew magic was real and it was bought and sold like anything else. *It's not like that anymore.*

*He also reminds me a little of my dad.* That was even odder, in a way, since Douman's personality was nothing like her father. But Ritsuka's father had also been an early riser and loved to cook and make tea. *Actually, I think Romani would understand. Didn't he say once that what you imprint on is what you love?* Maybe she was misremembering. But this was the basis of why Douman attracted her so much when other Servants... didn't. Although, if she was specifically attracted to another magus, why – oh. *All the other magus' in Chaldeas were either cold hearted snakes or weird.* Paracelsus and Merlin were both handsome but absolutely awful. Shakespeare wasn't really a magus and would drive her insane and everyone else was out of the question. (Ritsuka desperately tried not to think about Gilles that way) The only one semi-acceptable was Avicbron and he was so introverted he wouldn't even show his face!

Ritsuka sighed and rubbed her eyes before sitting up. It all made sense now and she felt better that she had it all sorted out in her own mind. There was nothing wrong with being attracted to Douman because he was a magus, and a lot of things right about it. They could talk sensibly about magic together, even if Ritsuka didn't have the talent to do the things he could. Oh, where was Douman exactly? Ritsuka extended her senses and found him outside in the courtyard. Going to the window she looked out curiously and smiled as she saw he was practicing what looked like a very basic form of Kung Fu. He had said he worked out every day to maintain his body, when he was alive.

Douman seemed to sense her watching and broke off his exercise to look up at the windows. Their eyes met for a moment and Ritsuka suddenly felt breathless. Then his voice touched her mind. *Ah, I see you are up. Would you like breakfast? They have made rice porridge with eggs.* That sounded wonderful!

*Definitely, I'll meet you in the dining room,* Ritsuka returned and quickly began getting dressed, zipping herself up. Douman was right really, the Chaldeas uniform was weird at best, but it couldn't be helped. Turning around she saw the travelling kimono had helpfully materialized, neatly folded on the bed. Holding back a giggle, Ritsuka put it on. How Douman hated her uniform! It was kind of funny really.

When Douman met her in the common room of the inn, he was fully dressed in his black kimono and looking absolutely wonderful. Ritsuka held back a giggle as she saw two young girls at a nearby table surreptitiously checking him out as their father sipped his tea, oblivious.

Breakfast arrived quickly and as she ate, Ritsuka idly pictured Douman in the kitchen with Emiya and Boudica and Tamamo Cat, preparing food for all of Chaldeas and probably quietly feuding with Emiya about who would make the tea.

"Master? What was that?" What? Ritsuka blinked, coming out of her reverie and focusing on him. Douman was looking mildly puzzled. "A... cat woman wearing only an apron and barking like a fox?"

"Oh! Sorry, I didn't mean to send that to you." That could happen, though, when a Servant connection was really deepening. "That's Tamamo Cat, one of the Tamamo Nine." Douman's eyes took on that vague look he got when he was communing with the Grail, then he blinked.

"Hmm, I see, another event that happened after I died. I wonder what role, if any, Abe no Seimei played in that?" What?!? Douman smiled, a toothy grin as he saw the look on her face. "Nevermind. That was likely my paranoia speaking. Although with Abe no Seimei, you never know."

"Merlin," Ritsuka murmured to herself. Often, you didn't KNOW he was behind something but it was safe to think he probably was. "Are we about ready to go?" She was done her breakfast although Douman was only half done his. That was odd.

"Mmm, I believe so. The herbs the cook used in this are not to my taste." Douman sipped his tea before shaking his head. "And the tea is bland again. This would be acceptable if I were hungry, but only then." Herbs? Ritsuka looked into her bowl and saw that the remains did have some green flecks.

"I didn't really notice," Ritsuka said uncertainly, trying to remember what the food had tasted like. She'd been really hungry and had just enjoyed it, especially the egg. Douman chuckled, a soft, surprisingly pleasant sound.

"That is nothing to worry about. I was born with an excellent sense of taste, then honed it on cooking and alchemy. Both benefit from tasting the concoctions." Tasting alchemy? Although, if it was something meant to be drunk anyway, that did make sense. "I suspect the

herbs in this were a dried blend, purchased cheaply at the apothecary and were mainly meant to make the dish seem fancier than mere porridge. Unfortunately, it included a few leaves that are mildly poisonous.” What? Ritsuka glanced at her bowl again. “Do not worry Master. The worst you would have from such a minute amount is a bit of digestive distress. But I recognized the bitterness.”

“That’s really interesting,” Ritsuka murmured as Douman finished his tea and set the cup aside. “Can you detect most poisons just from taste?” That could be really useful! Douman shook his head.

“Not really. The best poisons have no flavor and on a powerful onmyouji, only the best would be used.” Oh, that was true. Ritsuka’s mind went back to that cake she’d shared with Goredolf. Douman probably wouldn’t have noticed anything wrong with it. “I’m just good at detecting cooking accidents and foolish substitutions. I do think that’s likely spared me a few bad bouts of distress, in my life.”

“I see... do you know when the ship will be in?” Ritsuka asked, changing the subject. Douman nodded.

“From what I heard, it should be in port by mid-morning. I would suggest spending some time acquiring funds before we leave. The ship is, unfortunately, quite expensive.” Oh? Ritsuka gave him a questioning look and Douman shrugged. “This particular vessel is meant for the lesser nobility who don’t own pleasure barges of their own. It’s quite opulent and should be extremely comfortable, but at a cost. We should probably make a note to not return to this particular town.”

“I see. Well, that shouldn’t be a problem.” It would be in the real world but not in a Singularity.

The rest of the trip went as expected. The barge really was beautiful, with piles of cushions and a surprising number of cute little dogs brought by a young noblewoman. They were all very friendly and Ritsuka was able to pet and play with them, although they cowered away from Douman. Douman tried out various looks on her, using the cosmetics and perfecting the “look” they needed as they practiced her manner. He also used the things he’d bought from the apothecary to make the reagents he needed and Ritsuka was fascinated to learn they had a rather esoteric purpose... they would bind his spell firmly to an object, preventing it from being dispelled. The result of his efforts was a brown, partly crystallized cube that was deeply impregnated with magic to Ritsuka’s senses.

When they arrived in the capital, Ritsuka was favorably impressed. Heian Japan was a time of great cultural growth and prosperity and in the capital, it really showed. As they walked through the crowded streets she marveled a bit at the ancient architecture and mourned a bit at the fact that in the future, most of it would be gone. Douman walked in front of her, parting the crowds and Ritsuka noted with amusement that a lot of people recognized him and gave them a wide berth.

“Ritsuka!” Huh? “RITSUKA! Is that you???” Musashi? Ritsuka turned and waved, spotting the swordswoman agilely ducking and dodging to reach them. Douman paused, looking over his shoulder with a frown.

“Musashi! It’s great to see you! Did you finish your quest?” Ritsuka asked as she came to a halt in front of them. Musashi made a pained expression.

“Yes, I did, and it was HORRIBLE!” Horrible? Why? “They were incredibly insulted when I asked for it and I got in a big fight. Which is fine, that one guy gave me a great duel, but then I found out WHY they were angry and I felt like a total heel.” Huh? “This was supposed to be the kids’ birthday gift but he was bit by a snake and died, just a month ago.”

“Oh, that’s horrible!” Ritsuka exclaimed, wondering as she did what Merlin could want this thing for. And what was it? “They gave it to you? And what is it?” She was really curious now. Musashi nodded.

“Yeah, the father of the kid said to take the cursed thing away... it’s just a knife though.” Musashi reached into her belt and pulled out a small knife in a blue leather scabbard. Ritsuka took it and looked at it with puzzlement, scanning it with her senses. There was nothing special about it at all, it was just the kind of dagger you would give to a child as their first weapon. Why would –

Then Douman plucked the knife out of her hands.

“Douman?” Ritsuka said uncertainly as her Servant stared at the knife like he’d seen a ghost. He held it in his hands, examining it in complete silence, then drew it out of the scabbard and examined the blade. He carelessly dropped the scabbard so he could hold the knife better, looking at it like it was the most fascinating thing in the world.

“Uh, this card also appeared. Maybe it’s for you?” Musashi offered Douman another gilt embossed card. He blinked and took it, reading it before chuckling, then laughing. He sounded just like Limbo but instead of malice, Ritsuka could hear genuine mirth in his laughter, like Douman had just been told an excellent joke.

“Amazing! Incredible! I salute you Master and you as well, Musashi!” Douman grinned toothily as he flourished the card, before giving it to her. “This Merlin creature is also unique in his utter chicanery! To give such a message to ME!” Ritsuka flicked up the card and the words inside took her breath away. *Do the right thing.* “Oh, and I will, if only out of sheer spite!” Douman held up the blade, sideways in front of him, grinning over the shining metal. “You see, Master, this is the weapon that took my life.”

“Ooo.” Musashi made a small sound as Ritsuka gasped. That meant... Douman finished both their thoughts.

“This blade is nothing at all, mystically speaking, but against a certain Alter Ego it is a potent artifact indeed.” Douman admired the knife for a moment before picking up the sheath and putting it away. “I’ll figure out how to use this later, although the obvious choice is likely the correct one.” Ritsuka swallowed as she considered what that meant. The obvious choice... wasn’t good. Very effective, but not good.

“We’ll try to avoid that,” she said firmly as Musashi bit her lower lip, looking troubled.

“I don’t know what you guys are talking about, but we probably shouldn’t be talking about it anymore in public anyway.” Ah, good point, although Douman hadn’t said anything so Limbo couldn’t be watching. “Where are you going? I didn’t think I would meet you here.”

“The Imperial Court, although we need to get the schedule first.” Douman said, gazing at Musashi curiously. “You wouldn’t happen to have that?”

“No, but I know where to get it, I can show you the way.” Oh, that was almost as good! “Just follow me!” Musashi took the lead then and Ritsuka saw, to her amusement, that she was just as good at parting the crowd as Douman. As she followed behind the two of them, Ritsuka moved with a bounce in her step.

She was so ready to see Mash again!

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*I’m ready to do this.*

Ritsuka squared her shoulders, under her heavy kimono, and fanned herself as she waited on the Emperor’s pleasure. As she waited, she glanced around the imperial court. It was very beautiful, as she had expected. The silk hangings were incredibly fine and a few of them were oddly familiar. It took her a moment, but then Ritsuka recognized them as the same ones Douman had created for their temporary home. They weren’t quite the same, thanks to flaws in Douman’s memory. That was the problem with item creation, it depended heavily on the memory of the magus and the items could be subtly or not so subtly flawed because of it.

That was just a distraction though and Ritsuka glanced towards their quarry, feeling Douman’s presence over her head like a warm weight. Abe no Seimei was a beautiful young man with flaming red hair and very pale skin. His face was really incredibly handsome, with foxy features and an impish smile that spelled trouble to Ritsuka. His hair was mostly loose, but portions of it had been gathered into braids, thick boxy ones that were capped with golden beads. As she examined him, Ritsuka felt something odd from Douman. Puzzlement?

*Douman? Is something wrong?* Ritsuka asked her disembodied Servant. They had decided that manifesting him from nowhere would be the best way to impress the court.

*It is nothing Master.* Well if it was nothing he could tell her what it was. Douman seemed to feel her impatience and continued. *His hair... he never wore braids like that, not once that I remember. But this is the time I went into exile so perhaps I missed it.* Huh. That was kind of odd, but Douman was right, it was probably nothing. *And that necklace, what happened to that? It’s very fine but I never saw him wear it.* Oh? Ritsuka glanced towards Abe no Seimei and really examined the necklace for the first time. It was a beautiful piece of what looked like solid gold, reminding her strongly of the one Tamamo no Mae wore. *Perhaps he gave it away as a gift.*

*That could be...* Somehow, this was making her feel worried though. *Can you tell me if he does anything else that seems odd?*

*Yes Master.* Douman sounded a bit troubled now. Although she could still sense the way all his attention was on Seimei, like a hunting hound that had spotted its prey and just beneath

the surface was that rage and loathing he always carried. This really felt like a very controlled version of Penthesilea...

Vaguely wondering what Penthesilea would be like if she wasn't a Berserker, Ritsuka continued to wait. She had a good sense of the right moment and Douman confirmed it with a murmur in her ear. Stepping forward, Ritsuka snapped her fan dramatically. That caught everyone's attention.

"Abe no Seimei, I am told you are a master of shikigami. I too, claim that specialty," Ritsuka said firmly, fixing her goal in mind. This was to reach the Shadow Border and Mash! "I challenge you to a duel of magecraft, with the loser owing the winner a boon." Ritsuka could almost feel all the onmyouji of the court examining her, mostly with wariness. They could tell her mage circuits were terrible and that meant she had a trick up her sleeve. Most of her attention was on Abe no Seimei, though.

"A chance to win a boon from such a beautiful woman? How could I refuse?" Abe no Seimei's frankly appreciative stare made Ritsuka's cheeks heat and she could feel Douman's ire like a dark cloud. "What will the terms of this contest be?"

"You will do battle with my shikigami." Ritsuka gestured with her fan and Douman materialized. He was wearing nothing but a plain grey hakama with a brown obi. That was a deliberate choice, to emphasis that SHE was in control. There was a brief silence, then shocked whispers from the court. Ritsuka could feel the senses of the onmyouji sweeping over them both, evaluating Douman's nature.

"Ashiya Douman? What is this madness?" The Emperor demanded before looking at Abe no Seimei. He was silent for a moment, as if he was thinking but Ritsuka had the oddest feeling that he was... enjoying this? It was nothing on his face, just a feeling. But she wasn't going to let them ignore her.

"Ashiya Douman is my summoned spirit, my familiar. This is MY magic, the mastery of the spirits of the dead," Ritsuka proclaimed, ignoring all the problems with that. "And time is not linear, in the plane of spirits so Douman can be summoned at any time, before or after his death." Ritsuka added, anticipating the coming objection.

"Really? So you want to redo our prior match? How interesting!" Seimei exclaimed, bright eyed with excitement. "You must be so much more experienced! Maybe you can even come close to winning." Oh dear. Ritsuka felt Douman hanging onto his temper with an iron control that felt very, very practiced.

"Not if the third test is Clairvoyance. We both know my skill with that is horrendous and it is an inborn trait, not something that can be learned," Douman's tone was biting and Ritsuka suddenly understood how he'd developed that tone. A defense mechanism, so he could let some of his rage out when he HAD to be polite. "So I suggest that the third contest be decided by chance. We will roll the dice, high roll is the winner."

"What a delightful idea! I agree. If my Master wills it?" Ritsuka blinked at the mocking tone as Seimei looked towards the Emperor. From what she knew of Heian Japan, the Emperor



might be a figurehead, but it still seemed odd. Ritsuka glanced towards Douman and met his glance towards her and knew she didn't need to ask. *This is odd.*

"If that is what you wish," The Emperor's tone was reserved and Ritsuka was sure he wasn't happy about the blatant disrespect. Seimei smiled, widely and insincerely before turning back to them. Then his smile warmed into something more genuine.

"You go first, my beloved enemy," Seimei invited and Ritsuka felt Douman's hesitation before he gave Seimei a tight smile. Then he reached into his pouch and pulled out the brown cube.

What followed was breathtaking to a magus. Douman chanted and Ritsuka watched, fascinated, as a beautifully complex and insanely powerful spell took shape. She could never hope to do something like this but she could try to understand, and Ritsuka could tell that Douman was using some very complicated mathematically based equations in his spell. Then it completed and the cube shattered, the bits turning into a brown liquid that smelled like incense. In the air – the air? – gorgeous fractal patterns took shape. They were incredibly complicated, changing constantly and shifting colors and seemed tied to nothing but air.

"Ohhhh," Ritsuka murmured as she understood. Douman had bound his spell to AIR MOLECULES! And he was using Chaos magic, somehow borrowing from the Imaginary Sea? He must have taken what he'd learned from Da Vinci and turned it into a spell! There was whispering and gasps from the whole court as they waited for Abe no Seimei to respond.

Abe no Seimei studied the spell for a long moment and Ritsuka thought he was very handsome like that, absorbed in complete concentration. Then he blinked and looked at Douman.

"I can't possibly dispel that. I concede the victory to you," Seimei said and there were more gasps from the court. But then the half-Kitsune grinned and Ritsuka swallowed. That toothy grin and the malice behind it reminded her of Limbo. "HOWEVER! Dispel this, my greatest rival!" Then Seimei began casting and Ritsuka held her breath. He wouldn't have the reagent that Douman had carefully prepared, what would he do?

A tone rang out, then another, and another and they quickly blended into a horrible, disharmonic whole. They weren't loud but Ritsuka still winced in pain, then blinked as she saw Douman's fractals shift, their colors wavering wildly. Her breath stopped in her throat for a moment as she realized what Seimei had done... he'd piggybacked his spell onto Douman's, using the air molecules to carry his spell too, which was musical in nature.

"STOP!" Douman screamed and Ritsuka almost jumped out of her skin before turning to look at him. He had both his hands over his ears and his eyes were glowing red with rage. "YOU KNOW I HAVE PERFECT PITCH, YOU INSUFFERABLE ASSHOLE!" Oh dear. Seimei laughed, clearly enjoying his enemies' discomfort.

"That's the challenge, isn't it? Go on, dispel it if you can!" Seimei said merrily and Douman cursed him and all his ancestors before trying to dispel it. The first thing he tried was dispelling his own magic and the fractals vanished, but that did nothing at all and the tones

continued to ring. Ritsuka watched helplessly as Douman kept his hands over his ears, chanting spells with grim determination even as the sound tormented him.

“I surrender. I cannot dispel this,” Douman sounded grim but unsurprised. Ritsuka bit her bottom lip. She’d known it would come to this, but it still wasn’t welcome. Seimei smiled and dispelled his own magic with a short, quick word. The sound going away was a relief to everyone and Ritsuka could see that several people in the court had been suffering as much as Douman. “Well, shall we?” Douman opened a hand and revealed his dice, simple white and black. Seimei did the same, creating a set of dice that were tinted blue and Ritsuka could feel the two onmyouji scanning each others dice, making sure there was no trickery. “High roll wins.” Then Douman and Seimei both tossed the dice. They clattered to the floor and Ritsuka held her breath as they came to rest. Seimei had rolled a seven and Douman had rolled...

Nine!

“Ah, it seems I’ve lost,” Seimei said carelessly and Ritsuka could sense Douman’s ire. It almost formed words. *He isn’t taking me seriously.* Moving on instinct she reached out and gently touched his shoulder. His muscles felt hard as a rock but then he took a deep breath and Ritsuka felt them relax a bit. “What boon do you desire?”

“The use of your workspace, for the casting of a single spell,” Ritsuka replied, meeting his gaze. “I swear that it will not in any way harm Japan.” That should be Seimei’s only real concern in this. Seimei seemed surprised for a moment, then smiled warmly.

“Something that easy? Wonderful! Of course, I’ll need to supervise you but it shouldn’t be a problem. Would you like to spend supper with my family first? We can have a wonderful time!” ... Why did something about that seem wrong? Ritsuka felt like they were being taunted, somehow.

*We have little choice but to accept this invitation,* Douman whispered in her mind and Ritsuka sighed internally. She’d rather get Mash NOW, but they needed to be gracious.

“I would be glad to accept your invitation,” she said as smoothly as she could and Seimei smiled again, bright and insincere. Then the court went on and Ritsuka hoped they could get all of this over soon.

She NEEDED to see Mash again!

## Chapter 13

*I must leash my rage. I must harness my anger. I cannot let it rule me!*

Douman floated behind Ritsuka, watching Abe no Seimei's gentle flirting as he struggled to control his rage. He'd carefully walled himself from Ritsuka but even so, she sometimes glanced in the air and he could feel her concern for him. But he couldn't spare attention to reassure her, as he fought with himself.

*It's going to get worse. I know it's going to get worse.* Seimei, curse his black heart, was doing this to torment him. He would flirt with Ritsuka while flaunting his lovely young wife and Douman could do nothing! *I must bear this. I can be as vicious and venomous as I wish but I must do it calmly.* If he attacked the bastard half-kitsune the boon they had gained would be forfeit.

If he had been younger, Douman might not have been able to manage it. But he had decades of carefully won control beneath his belt and with long and painful practice, he brought his anger to heel. He chained it in iron links of pure will, leashing it like a rabid dog. When Douman was confident he had it under control he let his connection with Ritsuka relax a little.

*I am fine, Master. My apologies,* Douman murmured, not bothering to explain. She would know.

*Are you going to be okay for dinner? If not I'll tell him you can't.* How very tempting but... no.

*No, I need to watch over you.* Douman would carefully check her food, not for poison, but something more subtle like a gentle aphrodisiac or even a soporific. If Seimei was playing them false, disabling his Master would be a smart play. Ritsuka frowned, just a touch, as she caught the line of his thoughts.

*You really think he might drug me?* Well, yes. Seimei would certainly not be above drugging a woman he found attractive so his advances would be more likely to succeed. And he certainly would not be above gently nudging a competitor aside. *Oh.*

*Do not worry Master, nothing will get past me.* Douman was confident of that. He could feel Ritsuka's trepidation but then she nodded, accepting his reassurance.

Douman knew dinner would be painful to him in another way, though, and when Seimei's wife greeted them at the door it was like a thorn in his heart. Ah, Ane was so young, her face unlined and her eyes bright and... was she pregnant? Douman realized, with a bit of shock, that Ane was surely carrying Seimei's first child. *It is so hard to see her like this.* It was even worse when he materialized and Ane flinched from him, gazing at him with surprise and wariness. Well, it was to be expected.

“Don’t worry Ane. We should have plenty for visitors,” Seimei said easily and Douman wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d foreseen this and made sure there would be extra portions. “This is my wife, Ane. Ane, this is Ritsuka, a powerful Onmyouji from very far away. She and her familiar will be staying with us tonight.” Oh, did he assume so? Douman wondered how they would get out of that. Not just because he wanted to get away from Seimei but because Musashi would be expecting them back at the inn and he could easily see the swordswoman going to beard the Emperor himself if they didn’t. Although, he could just send one of his shikigami with a message.

“Familiar...? Ashiya Douman?” Ane sounded confused, understandably so. Seimei quickly murmured to her and she nodded. “I see... welcome Ritsuka. I hope you don’t mind but we were having chicken and noodles tonight.”

“That would be wonderful, it smells delicious,” Ritsuka replied and Douman just followed, intending to be nothing but her shadow. It would be much safer in any case. But would Abe no Seimei allow it?

To Douman’s utter relief, his rival did allow it. He seemed mostly intent on learning about Ritsuka, which was not ideal at all, but was better than Douman himself being forced to make conversation. Instead he devoted part of his attention to making sure that Seimei wasn’t trying any magical chicanery, while also considering the bigger picture.

*There are so many minor discrepancies.* Seimei’s hairstyle, the necklace he was wearing, and now that they were at supper Douman had also noticed another thing – a ring that he did not recognize. It was rose gold and nothing but a thin band, but highly impregnated with magic. That was exactly the sort of thing he *would* have noticed, yet it was completely unfamiliar. Was it perhaps a gift for the Emperor that he was wearing for now? Seimei was very good at making such things. *I can think of easy, conventional explanations for all of these things. But can I think of an unconventional one?* Logic dictated that the simplest explanation was likely correct, but that didn’t mean he should overlook what was unlikely. Douman pushed the food around his plate, tasting none of it as he tried to think of another explanation for all of the oddities.

One came to him and Douman froze for a moment, his chopsticks caught in the heavy noodles. This was... bad. Extremely bad, horrendously bad, *terrifyingly* bad. Swallowing back a bit of panic, Douman considered his idea carefully, pretending to eat some food. Could he possibly be correct? Surely Limbo would have noticed! ...But no, the very idea he was contemplating would mean his Alter Ego was hideously outmatched. Yet, surely not! Surely it couldn’t be true. Could it?

Was there any way to test his theory?

“Seimei, the timeline isn’t quite clear in my mind,” Douman suddenly said, his voice sweet as velvet and full of dark venom. Ritsuka and Ane both stared at him, startled by the tone. “How old are you?” Douman gazed at his rival and didn’t miss the smugness as Seimei *smirked*.

“Why, I’m twenty six,” he lied glibly and Douman’s hand tightened on his chopsticks. That hadn’t solved *anything*! How like Seimei, to make sure the question went unanswered.

“Don’t worry about it, my beloved enemy. We can discuss it more when you finish summoning.”

“I absolutely loathe your clairvoyance,” Douman muttered, but went back to his food, poking at it grimly. That was his Achilles’ heel here, the bastard’s ability to see into the future. In the covert war they had waged, Douman had found many, many ways to handicap Seimei’s Clairvoyance but here and now, none of them were at his disposal.

*Douman, what’s wrong?* Ritsuka whispered in his mind and Douman hesitated. Should he tell her? But she should be ready for whatever was going happen after they finished summoning.

*This is only a theory. I am hopefully incorrect.* He really didn’t think so though. This was making far too much horrible sense. *I believe my wretched Alter-Ego has fallen victim to one of the primary laws of magic, the Law of Similarity.* Ritsuka continued to make conversation with Ane as they spoke. She was quite good at this, he noticed. *If Abe no Seimei never died, he would surely have felt something when his past self was incarnated into this Singularity. It would be child’s play for him to dispatch that copy and take his place.* How would he have done that? Absorb it, most likely. Douman caught Ritsuka’s slight stiffening, although that was the only sign of alarm. *If I am correct, Limbo is not in control of this Singularity. Seimei is.*

*Wouldn’t Limbo have noticed?* Ritsuka asked and Douman wished he could believe that but...

*No. All the tactics I would have used against Seimei would work equally well if employed by Seimei himself. Worse yet, Limbo does not actually know Abe no Seimei. That is a horrendous weakness in this scenario. Seimei is not actually much of an actor. Even after a single day I have noticed so many things wrong! He couldn’t have fooled me for more than a week.* Douman was confident of that. *But Limbo does not realize and I’m certain that Seimei has completely compromised his control of the Singularity. He’s just waiting for the right time to strike.*

*Why is he willing to let us summon then? What he said indicates he is?* Yes, Douman felt that way as well, that they would be allowed to summon. Hmm...

*It’s actually rather difficult for me to guess his motives,* Douman said slowly, noticing that his plate of food was almost done. He hadn’t tasted any of it. *It’s possible he needs us to get rid of Limbo for him.* The knife the Merlin creature had given them would support that. Seimei had nothing so elegant and simple to dispose of Limbo with. Although, did he even know about it? Merlin also had high Clairvoyance and when two people like that came up against each other, things became bizarre. Douman shelved that thought for later consideration. *It’s also possible that he is... having fun.* Douman couldn’t help the loathing that seeped into those words. He *hated* not being taken seriously!

*I see. What do you think we should do?* Douman wished he could recommend just walking out. Unfortunately, that would virtually be a death sentence.

*We must follow through. But as soon as Mash has been summoned, hide behind her shield.* Was summoned the right word? Relocated? Whatever. Ritsuka nodded as the servants brought out dessert, some beautiful little candies stamped in the shape of suns. Douman

frowned as he felt the magic in them, but it appeared to be a harmless flavor enhancer. The candy itself, when he tried it, almost made him choke. *What is this?!*

“Oh, this is good,” Ritsuka murmured and Douman gazed at her in surprise before looking back at the candy suspiciously. Did they have different flavors? He carefully tried it again. It was almost painfully sweet, with such a strange flavor beneath it! So bitter, it did cut the sweetness. “And you’re really showing off.” Eh?

“I admit, I’m a terrible showoff. What can I say? It’s just so fun!” Seimei said cheerfully and Douman wanted to strangle him. That feeling increased as Ritsuka whispered in his mind.

*These candies are flavored with cacao. It comes from across the sea, it doesn’t exist in Japan in this time period. He knows that we know. ARGH!* Not taking him seriously, as usual, even after Douman had *killed him!* Curse the fucking bastard son of a half-kitsune to a thousand – no, calm down, he needed to calm down. Douman took deep breaths, counted to ten, and put the final candy in his mouth. The sugar did help sooth his temper a bit although he wasn’t sure he liked this ‘cocoa’ business.

After the dinner Seimei escorted them to his workroom and Douman’s mood soured further as he saw the state of it.

“You jackass,” Douman muttered to himself as he kicked a few scrolls away. The place was an utter pigsty, compared to his own scrupulously neat workroom. Scrolls and items everywhere, a table full of odds and bobs meant for shikigami creation, shelves where Douman could tell, even from a cursory glance, that there were no labels and no organization... argh! “How did you manage to teach anyone?” What a nightmare for a student. Seimei glanced around with an air of vague surprise, as if he was taking in his own workroom for the first time.

“I suppose it’s a bit messy.” A bit? And Douman was not inclined to be tolerant at this moment.

“This isn’t a bit messy, it’s actually dangerous to your students. Of course you can simply swipe a bottle off the wall but how can an apprentice be expected to know all the reagents?” Douman said sharply before glancing at the table. “And several of those are not safe to handle.” Douman could instantly pick them out, the parts that were in the process of being used and wouldn’t take kindly to being disturbed.

“Can you please stop judging me?” Seimei sounded non-plussed and Douman was pleased that he’d actually managed to surprise the bastard. Hmm, his Clairvoyance had to be degraded, likely Merlin’s work. “I even set up the summoning circle for you!” He had? Douman glanced down at the floor and saw, to his surprise, that a summoning circle had been inscribed in the floor in flowing, elegance script. Beautiful... and partly covered with trash.

“Enough of this nonsense,” Douman muttered before starting to tidy the area. He didn’t know where things should go, if there was a place for them in the first place, but they had to go somewhere. Ritsuka began helping him and Douman was sure she also saw the problem.

“Hey! What is wrong with the two of you? You just need to start the summoning!” Seimei was getting quite annoyed now, how pleasant. “You don’t need to touch all of my things!”

“I know, we’re really thankful for the help, but you see, we’re going to summon multiple servants,” Ritsuka replied as Douman carefully stacked some scrolls in a corner. “They need a place to stand and we don’t want them to crush or damage your things. And while they can become incorporeal, they just might not, depending on who we summon.” Yes, some meathead Archer or Saber wouldn’t care if they stepped on a scroll.

“Oh... I hadn’t really thought of that.” Seimei said thoughtfully before snapping his fingers. Then a flurry of tiny shikigami, Seimei’s specialty, fluttered through the air. Everything was tidied away in an instant and Douman blinked as a scroll was even plucked out of his hands. “Cleaning isn’t difficult when you want to get it done.” Lovely?

“Whatever.” That couldn’t have been meant to irritate him, Seimei couldn’t know that Douman was extremely neat. No, the half-kitsune was just disorganized. “In that case, I shall begin.” It wasn’t like he wanted to be around Seimei more than necessary.

Douman took his position in the summoning circle and quickly checked it for errors. Finding none – he hadn’t expected any – he began to chant. The circle responded beautifully and Douman felt his consciousness elevated again, but this time it was far more profound. Instead of merely sensing the dome of energy he was floating in the centre of it and it was the easiest thing in the world to reach out and breach it. As he did, Douman felt like a hand grabbed his and acting on pure instinct, he pulled.

A young woman with odd pinkish, purplish hair was pulled out of the air by his reaching hand. Douman didn’t let her distract him, merely pushed her firmly towards Ritsuka as he continued the chant, not faltering for a moment. He vaguely heard Ritsuka saying her name and getting behind that giant shield, as multiple summonings began to form.

The first few summonings were easy as breathing. A man in a red jacket appeared and Douman vaguely registered *Archer* as a woman in blue arrived and was labeled *Assassin*. But then something larger began to take shape. Douman was uncomfortably aware that he was no longer in control of the spell, another force was taking action – the Counter Force? – and he was being left with little choice but to act as the conduit, no matter how painful it might be. It quickly became extremely painful as Douman had to start repeating his chant, channeling an immense surge of energy as all parts of the summoning circle glowed like fire. And still, whatever he was attempting to summon was not manifesting. What was going wrong?!

*You are going to burn me out at this rate!* Douman tried to direct the thought at what he presumed was the Counter Force but Ritsuka heard it too and he heard her voice raised, speaking to someone else? Another force intervened, gentling the summoning and making the flow of power smoother and less painful. Douman was vaguely aware of equations, mathematics, things from the infinite sea but had to ignore them. His part was still to bring this summoning into being.

The blazing summoning circle finally deigned to dispense the Servant. Douman felt the energy solidify into something larger and more complex than any Servant should be, yet when the dust finally cleared, what stood in front of him was a surprisingly normal looking

man with a floating girl by his shoulder? Douman realized, with insight from the Grail, that this was a *Grand Servant*. A larger Servant container that was specifically meant to deal with Beasts –

“*SEIMEI!*” Douman didn’t even think. He just turned, shrieked like a Berserker and cast his Noble Phantasm. Red light exploded but Seimei just smiled, a smile of ineffable smugness and then the red light was overwhelmed by blue. Douman had just a moment to realize he was in trouble before blue fire in the shape of a phoenix lashed out at him. He managed to snap up a quick shield, but that only mitigated the impact as the power slammed into him. Douman registered the man and the girl neatly stepping aside to allow him to pass, the power propelling him right through a wall and into the rest of the house.

Douman came to rest in a cloud of dust and debris, feeling a bit stunned from the impact. But then his heart chilled as he heard a scream, far too close. Lifting his head he saw as a tiny shikigami in the shape of an origami fox *severed Ane’s arm!*

“ANE!” Douman’s fist lashed out, dispatching the fox effortlessly. But more of them appeared, and his own shikigami came into play, attacking the foxes with little green rays. Douman knew Seimei’s shikigami were better, knew he needed to take an active part but he ignored it to kneel by Ane’s side. She was going into shock, her eyes wide as he grabbed her arm and applied pressure. The amputation had happened just below the elbow, at least she would have that but the bleeding had to be stopped. Douman was no expert on healing but he knew a few emergency spells and cast the strongest he had, binding the flesh together.

“What... just...?” Ane blinked, some awareness coming back into her eyes as the pain lessened. “No, let go of me!” The way she looked at him... Douman felt his heart break, a little, at the naked distrust on her face.

“Ane, there is no time to explain but there is a future you don’t know about and your husband wants you dead,” Douman said softly before gently kissing her on the forehead, like a child. The distrust turned to shock as he gathered her up into his arms.

*Douman! Are you okay?!?* An explosion cut through the air in front of him, incinerating Seimei’s shikigami and glancing off the shielding spell he still had up. Douman swore quietly... that felt like the oni berserker’s power.

“I am fine Master, I have Ane. Are we escaping?” This was the worst place in the world to fight Abe no Seimei. Douman knew exactly why he’d been pitched out of the workshop – to see Ane die, but also to let Seimei reclaim full control of the ley line nexus. *Yes, we’re getting out of here. He seems to be letting us go.* Well, Seimei wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of letting them summon if he planned to immediately end their lives.

“Let go of me! You’re lying – “ Ane’s fist hit him in the face, to Douman’s complete surprise. Well, she was a spirited woman and right now, a loyal wife. Perhaps he shouldn’t have dulled her pain so thoroughly, but he could just go a step further. A few quick words and Ane gasped before falling into a magical sleep. Carrying her gently, Douman kept his shikigami active and protecting him as he quickly left the building. It wasn’t as easy as it could have been, thanks to errant blasts of fire and he could hear the oni woman’s laughter. But Douman was still able to exit the place first, and frowned as he heard bells ringing. Were they



summoning the onmyouji who dealt with fires – there were currently multiple homes on fire – or was there more to it? Douman was just glad when Mash barrelled through what was left of a wall, using her shield to destroy the already ruined brickwork, Ritsuka right behind her. They were mostly being harassed by shikigami now and the Archer was coming in handy picking them off, but there were so many of them! Douman immediately directed his shikigami to join the fray, noticing as he did that he'd lost perhaps half of them protecting Ane.

“Let's go get Musashi and get out of here!” A good idea, the whole city might take arms against them. In fact, Douman had a bad feeling the bells weren't just for fire containment.

*No, go to the gates. We'll get in touch with Musashi, she can meet you there.* That strange voice made his head snap towards Ritsuka and he saw a spectral figure in the air. Ah, this had to be Da Vinci. *There are soldiers and magi heading to your location.* Oh lovely. Aware that he was largely spent after the summoning, Douman let the Archer, Assassin and the Grand Rider do all the work getting them out.

They could discuss all of this later. For now, they needed to escape.

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