

Skirmish (IV)

Matou Shinji.

Born of Matou Byakuya and a woman married for the specific purpose of giving their bloodline an heir capable of Magecraft.

A task which she failed.

A failure paid with her life.

A life and a failure passed unto her son.

Disliking Matou Shinji came easy to everyone who knew him even just in passing. His abrasive personality insured that such was the case.

Only two people in the world did not avoid him because by his behavior, one of which was Emiya Shirou.

Shinji found it easy to be friends with Shirou, ever so humble and unassuming. Even though he was a honor student and former captain of the archery club, he never gave the impression of thinking very highly of himself.

Shinji never felt threatened by Shirou, never felt inferior to his redhead friend, even though he was somehow more liked than himself by the female half of the student body. None of this bothered Shinji in the least.

That is, until he took over as Rider's Master and Zouken of all people decided to throw him a bone.

"That boy, Emiya, is the Master of Caster. If he's anything like his father you won't be a match for him."

All this time Shirou had been Magus. Undoubtedly, all this time he must have been secretly looking down on Shinji, shaking his head at how low the blood of Matou had fallen, laughing behind his back as soon as he turned around.

Shinji did not think these thoughts, but his feeling of inadequacy grew a hundred fold all the same. Resentment swelled into his heart and sought an outlet which Rider provided, in more ways than one.

As a Master, he started to become more confident, convincing himself that his wish was within his grasp. Still, he could not simply forget Shirou and the sour bond they shared.

Shinji decided then that he would give him a chance to prove himself a friend. He would offer him an alliance and if Shirou accepted it, Shinji would forgive him.

All he had to do was getting him to a secluded place, taking advantage of the helpful facade he wore among the sheeps.

All that was left now was to confront him.

“So, Emiya, my old buddy... shall we talk?”

Rider knew what she had to do. Her Master had instructed her clearly. If Caster’s Master, Emiya Shirou, refused to ally himself with them or tried to summon his Servant she was to struck him down before he could do so.

Command Seals allowed to bend space and have one’s Servant appear regardless of distance, but the command had to be vocalized.

Rider might not have been at the peak of her power with Shinji as Master, but she could still strike down a Magus in less time than it would take for them to get two words out of their mouth.

Emiya Shirou’s mistake was not having his Servant with him all the time. Shinji could get away with something like that because, unlike a Magus, he had no Mana leak to give away his identity as Master. It was perhaps the only advantage of his condition.

She didn’t know whether to give him credit for managing to fool an enemy Master, or cringe at Emiya Shirou’s foolishness.

Either way, her role was clear.

Shirou let out a long drawn sigh. Tohsaka and Medea would probably chew his head off later for falling for this trap. They all believed Matou Zouken to be the Master of the third Servant, because they were certain he was the last Matou left with any talent for Magecraft.

Therefore, Shirou didn't suspect anything at all when Shinji approached him. Tohsaka wouldn't have made that mistake.

Shinji was not a Magus, Shirou was sure of that. The book he held in place of a Command Seal was a sufficient telltale.

It went a great went to explain why his Servant needed to feed on normal humans.

Still... why did it have to be him?

“.... Shinji.”

“Why the sour look, Emiya? Cheer up! Isn’t this great? We’re both Masters in this Holy Grail War. What are the odds?”

“I was wondering that myself,” Shirou replied bitterly. “So? What did you want to talk about?”

“Hmm? Straight to business, is it? You really ought to loosen up some and enjoy life more.”

“The Holy Grail War is not something I find myself enjoying very much, Shinji.”

‘Caster, can you hear me?’

“Man, Emiya,” Shinji shook his head. “I go out of my way to set up this encounter and you just have to give me that attitude.”

‘Shirou? What’s wrong?’

“You got me by surprise, is all. Besides, standing there with your Servant while I’m without my own is a little off putting.”

‘Synchronize with my senses. Do not teleport here. Trust me.’

Shirou felt a pressure inside his head and he knew that Caster was looking through his eyes and listening through his ears.

‘I’m coming!’

‘No! Trust me! I have a plan.’

“Yeah, I totally get what you mean. Who would want to be caught outside without their Servants these days, right? The streets just aren’t safe like they used to be, anymore.”

“Ayako would agree with you if she was here,” Shirou replied.

“Yeah. Shame that, isn’t it?” Shinji nodded. “I hope they catch the guy that did it. That’s just awful.”

Shirou disregarded the utter lack of remorse on Shinji’s face. The possibility existed that he hadn’t ordered his Servant to target Ayako specifically and that she had been just a target of opportunity. Too bad Shirou didn’t believe in coincidences.

‘Are you sure of what you’re doing?’

‘Positive. If you came, they would just run. Let them believe they have the upper hand. Just... get ready to follow through.’

‘Follow through with what?’

“So... what did you want to talk about? I'm on a bit of a tight schedule, so I don't have too much time to spend here.”

Shinji's eye twitched but his smile didn't waver.

“Well, it's pretty simple Emiya. The Grail War is a dangerous business. We should watch each other's back.”

“You're right,” Shirou nodded. “The Grail War is indeed dangerous, which is why I'd rather you dropped out entirely. Please, Shinji.”

Shinji's smile bled out of his face so fast Shirou almost thought he it had been a product of his imagination all along.

“... you really expect me to do that? How much of an idiot do you think I am? Don't mess with me! If you won't be my ally, then you're my enemy. Rider!”

The purple haired Servant came at him with a burst of speed that would have startled any human, Magus or otherwise, who hadn't been sparring with someone of her caliber nearly every day for several weeks now.

So, anyone but Emiya Shirou.

Rider was fast, but not fast enough. Certainly not fast as a Servant of her Class should have been.

She was severely weakened, her presence barely perceivable even now that she was so close to him in her physical form.

If Shinji hadn't called her by her title, Shirou would have thought her an Assassin-Class.

Still, weakened or not, she closed the distance between them in the time of a heartbeat. Weakened or not, she wasn't an opponent Shirou could take easily.

He had time only for one spell. Either Reinforcement or Projection. He chose the former.

"Trace On!"

He flooded his body with Mana, but he was already moving out of the way of Rider's weapon before he was even done. If he hadn't reacted so quickly, her nail would have stabbed him right between the eyes.

There was the faintest arching of eyebrows underneath her blindfold, but Rider wasn't caught flat-footed so easily.

She swung her arm and the chain attached to her weapon came rushing at Shirou like a steel snake. Shirou ducked underneath it and rushed towards the Servant, fist poised to strike.

She hadn't expected her target to get closer rather than trying to get further away, but again, she was in no way a novice when it came down to a fight.

Her knee shot up fast enough to separate his head from his shoulders had it connected, but Shirou had already halted his charge and swept at her feet instead.

For a brief moment, Rider was floating helplessly in mid-air, but she recovered quickly, pivoting her body and landing on her feet.

The entire motion took less than a half a second, yet more than enough for her target to disappear from her field of vision.

The sound of footsteps behind her alerted her of his position.

She turned around just in time to parry a black falchion slashing down at her.

"Kh!" she groaned involuntarily, legs buckling under the weight of his attack. She was greatly weakened, no doubt, but this kind of strength wasn't something to look down upon in any case.

Shinji had made a huge blunder, unsurprisingly.

He did not know what Emiya Shirou was capable of. He hadn't even known he was a Magus until recently and both he and Rider had gone with the assumption that he was a Magus like any other.

That had been a mistake. Emiya Shirou wasn't a support type like most Magi were forced to be when dealing with Servants.

He was a fighter through and through and not an average one either.

He didn't have his Servant with him at all times simply because he did not need it.

That was the realization Rider came to, as she was forced on a desperate defensive. Her body twisted and turned as she parried and dodge all of his blows. They looked evenly matched but it was an illusion.

For starters, his technique was superior to hers. He fought with great efficiency of movement, whereas Rider's style was based on great, swinging blows meant to maximize her weapons. Nails and chains were a combination unusual enough that even a skilled combatant would have a difficult time predicting their patterns, but for whatever reason

Emiya Shirou seemed to know her every move before she even made them, putting her even more at a disadvantage.

To make things worse, her Mana was rapidly depleting. She didn't have much to begin with, which was the reason why they took this approach.

She didn't have the time to use her Noble Phantasm or her eyes, and he certainly wouldn't give her an opening for her to retreat and for Shinji to flee. To make things worse, Caster was just a Command Seal away.

Their great plan had completely backfired. It looked like she would meet her end here. So much about protecting Sakura. She couldn't even protect herself.

Then again... what else was she expecting?

A monster cannot protect a single thing. They can just destroy and devour everything and everyone in their path.

These were the rules of this world and she was not exempt from them.

She would have closed her eyes in resignation if she could, but even that much was forbidden to her.

When she was pushed with her back against a tree, she put up her nail to parry simply out of instinct rather than any will to fight or survive.

Imagine her surprise then, when the black falchion shattered upon impact with her weapon.

For a brief moment, she thought this was her opportunity for a comeback, before she realized that the hand which had been holding the now broken sword continued its descent toward her chest. Worse, it was not as empty as it should have been.

Instead of the black falchion, his hand now held a short blade, held in reverse grip, poised to strike at her heart.

It was a feint from the start. The falchion had been shattered on purpose for the sake of getting through her guard.

There was no time to either parry or dodge. Her fate was already sealed. The blade landed squarely over her heart.

Strangely enough though, Emiya Shirou's words didn't sound like a cry of victory.

"Rule Breaker!"

Shinji watched with disbelief etched across his face as Emiya not only held his ground against Rider, but actively pushed her back. Truth to be told, his eyes couldn't follow their exchange. It was all just a blur of limbs and clash of steel, but even an amateur could tell that the side forced to take one step back after another was the losing one.

Then, it all came to a head when Rider was pushed against a tree and Emiya stabbed her square in the chest.

"Rule Breaker!" Shinji heard him say, and the Book of False Attendants which proved he was the Master of Rider burst into flames, leaving the aspirant Magus with nothing but a fistful of ashes.

Several miles away from where the first true conflict of the Holy Grail War was taking place, Sakura was going about her business as usual. That is to say, she was laying in a pit full of worms, being ravaged from the inside out like she had been for everyday of her life since she had been adopted by the Matou.

She had long since learned to shut down her mind and heart and just let it happen, turning herself into little more than a doll of flesh without a mind of her own.

She barely felt the sting on her hand and she didn't even see the two remaining Command Seals appear on her skin, only for them to vanish immediately after.

The one who noticed was Zouken, but he had no more words to waste expressing his disappointment towards his own flesh and blood, especially not when Shinji wasn't even there to hear them.

He would devise a suitable punishment for him once he came home. For the time being, he had Sakura to work with.

'Caster NOW!'

The moment Shirou called out Rule Breaker, Medea had been frozen in disbelief. Only Shirou's voice managed to shake her out in time for her to understand what he wanted her to do and follow through as he had asked.

She reached through her link with Shirou and pulled at the threads of the contract severed by Rule Breaker. Her Noble Phantasm could cut all mystical bindings but stitching them back elsewhere was Caster's own ability as a Magus.

If Rider had the ability to see, she would have noticed the sclera of Shirou's eyes turn pitch black as Caster took over his body for a moment.

Both Rider and Shirou felt a burning pain shot through them. For the former, it was located on the point where Rule Breaker had struck; for the latter it was on his hand, where his set of Command Seals was located.

Under his sleeve, three more seals appeared on his skin, extending the sword-like mark into something closer in looks to a spear.

Her job done, Caster released control of Shirou's body and teleported to his side.

Once he felt the burn of his Command Seal extend on his hand and the sudden intake of Mana, Shirou knew he had succeeded.

He quickly jumped away from Rider and not a fraction of second later, Caster appeared next to him through her distinctive cloud of black smoke.

Rider slowly rose to her full height, her back still against the tree which had blocked her retreat. She seemed to regard herself with some curiosity, undoubtedly surprised by the sudden turn of events.

Eventually, her blind gaze turned onto Shirou himself.

"What would you have of me, Master?" she asked, her voice betraying nothing but utter apathy.

"R...Rider?" Shinji asked weakly where she had left him less than a minute earlier. The Servant of the Mount did not acknowledge her former Master in the least.

Shirou sighed. "Caster, would you mind keeping an eye on her for a while? Shinji and I need to... have words," he said, golden eyes turning onto the purple haired boy.

Shinji took a step back, his looking from Rider to Shirou and Caster. His former Servant revealed no intention to stand up for him, and therefore he did the only thing he could in such a situation.

"I... llllhhh!" he shrieked, turning around and making a run for it. He disappeared behind the corner of the school building in a matter of seconds.

One could say what he wanted about him, but Shinji was quite fast on his legs when he was sufficiently motivated.

"Please, keep things civil while I'm gone," he told Caster, before taking off after Shinji. "I'll be back in a minute."

Rider hesitated. Her new Master took off after Shinji and she could do nothing to stop him. Besides being now connected to Emiya Shirou, and thus under the threat of his Command Seals, Caster wouldn't let her take a single step in the direction they went.

Mindful of this, she didn't even express the intention of doing such thing. She couldn't protect Shinji herself. She could only hope that Emiya Shirou saw him as completely harmless now that he had lost his Servant and would let Shinji get away with his life, at least.

Presently, she had more pressing things to worry about.

"Lady Medea," she greeted her fellow Servant.

"Lady Medusa," the Witch greeted back.

They knew each other, in passing. A fleeting meeting from a distant past that never truly mattered, yet they knew each other well enough by reputation to be wary of one another.

Their history different greatly, but they were still similar in too many ways for comfort. Both of them had destroyed everything they ever cherished with their own hands.

They were not people to be trusted lightly.

Neither one spoke so much as a word. They just stared impassively at one another. The tension between them was palpable. Somehow, Medusa had the impression that trying to kill Medea's Master, now her own Master as well, hadn't won her any point in the eye of the other Servant.

Oh, well. There was never any use in crying over spilt milk. Besides, she was not dead, which was a better result than what Medusa thought she would get just a few moments prior.

One had to look at bright side of things.

"Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!" Shinji cursed as he ran as fast as his legs could carry him, looking behind his back every few step to see if he was being chased. "Useless fucking bitch!"

To think that Rider would be stolen from him so easily and that she wouldn't even so much as express displeasure about it...

"How dare they? How dare they? How there they?"

They were out to mock him, each and every one of them. To make matter worse, there was nothing he could do to change anything. He wasn't even a Magus. He was nothing.

He had no hope to take Rider back and give Emiya his due.

He could only run for his life and hide from everything.

'You are just like your father. Useless.'

Those were Zouken words, repeated over and over again in the course of the years, whenever he deigned to even acknowledge Shinji existence at all.

This was Shinji's great opportunity to prove him wrong, to prove all of them wrong. Instead, he just proved them right.

The stab of self-loathing in his guts and the sting of unshed tears behind his eyes was even more potent than the fear that made him run.

He wanted to stop. To stand his ground and fight. A laughable notion. He would be no match for anyone.

Running and hiding was the only thing he could do. Zouken had been right all along and that knowledge twisted Shinji's heart more than it already was.

Eventually, he almost made it out of the school grounds. Apparently, none had bothered to even chase him after all.

He wasn't worth even that much effort in the end.

He ran the entire length of the school and turning around yet another corner. That was when he was suddenly grabbed by the jacket of his school uniform and shoved against the wall.

He found himself staring into Emiya Shirou's unwavering gaze.

"Shinji!" he growled.

"I-iiih. E-Emiya! It's me... your old pal. Y-You wouldn't harm your friend, would you?"

He sounded pathetic even to himself, but he was too scared to just look at him in the eyes and die like a man. He could only cry and beg, because even struggling would be completely pointless.

It always was.

Shirou's eyes narrowed and Shinji felt his heart drop.

That was it for him. He closed his eyes and waited for death to come.

"..."

"..."

"..."

Three of the four people present in the Student Council Room sat at corners of the length of desk placed in the middle of the room. Caster sat facing Rider, the two of them engaged in a silent staring match.

Shinji sat on the other end, on the same side as Rider, the further away from the door.

Shirou stood to the side, pouring tea into four cups on a tray, which he then served to everyone before sitting himself in front of Shinji.

Feeling very much like a cornered mouse, Shiji wasn't really in the mood for tea. However, he wasn't stupid enough to reject the hospitality of someone who could snap his neck without much effort.

He sipped at his tea, glancing to everyone else in the room, almost expecting to be torn to pieces without warning.

"So... Shinji," Shirou eventually said, making him nearly jump out of his skin. "Why did you decide to take part in the Holy Grail War?"

"... Because of the Grail?" he answered half-heartedly.

Shirou gave him an unamused look.

"I meant what wish did you want fulfilled?"

Why did he want to know? What did it matter now that he had been taken out of the competition? Was he building up to mock him?

Those were the things he wanted to lash out and ask, but he was in no position to act high and mighty as he would have wanted. Therefore, he answered honestly.

"... to become a Magus."

"Ah," Shirou replied, nodding. "Why, though?"

"W-what do you mean why?" Shinji couldn't help but ask in a challenging way.

"The whole point of being a Magus is to reach Akasha. With the Grail you can skip being a Magus altogether and get right at the finish line, yet that doesn't seem to be your goal."

"... Why do you care? What's even the purpose of this? I've already lost."

Shirou slammed his fist on the desk, jumping to his feet.

"I care because I want to understand why my friend decided to get into a deadly competition. I want to understand what's so important to him that he would put his life on the line and his friends into the hospital. That's what it means to me!"

Shinji was cowering on his chair, looking at Shirou like the devil incarnate. Shirou noticed this and sighed, sitting back down.

"Look, if you don't want to answer, that's fine. Just... Damn it Shinji, you're better than this."

To the side, Rider made an unintelligible sound, so faint that only Caster and Shirou heard it. The former because of her close position to the other Servant and the latter because of his keen hearing.

Shirou glanced at the purple haired but his gaze soon returned to Shinji.

"... you don't understand anything, Emiya. You don't know what it's like being born without the predisposition to Magecraft in a family of Magi."

Shirou frowned. "Sakura seems to be faring well enough."

"Eh... eh ah ah ah!" Shinji laughed. He really couldn't hold it back. The absurdity of it all was too much for him to bear. Even Shinji wouldn't think Sakura was anywhere close to faring well by any stretch of the imagination. "If that is what you like to believe, Emiya, don't let me tell you otherwise."

Shirou frowned. Shinji's statement didn't make any sense. By his own admission, whatever gripe Shinji had with Magecraft was born of the fact that he knew about it in the first place. For Sakura to have the same problem she would have to...

"Sakura knows about Magecraft?"

"Ah! Hahahaahaha," Shinji crackled hysterically. "Oh, boy. Of course she does, you dimwit. You should have seen the look on her face when the old man told us about you. Absolutely priceless."

Shirou felt something cold twist his stomach, but he pushed it down.

So, Sakura knew of Magecraft and she had been told he was a Magus. If Shinji was to be believed and their lives as failed inheritors was less than stellar, then Sakura was now probably afraid of him.

It went a great way to explain why she made herself scarce recently.

He didn't like that. However, that was probably for the best for the time being.

With the Grail War afoot, being in close association with a Master would paint a huge target on anyone. Currently, Sakura was safer the farther away from him she was.

That knowledge was enough to put away whatever reservation he had about the circumstances. Once the Grail War was over he could approach her and address the situation.

"I see," was everything that he said in response. There was nothing that his words could do for Sakura at that point in time. "I'm sorry, Shinji. I never realized your circumstances. I'm afraid I haven't been a very good friend to you or to Sakura."

"...hah?" Shinji asked. "Are you messing with me?"

"I'm honest. I'm not sure how it looked like, but I never thought less of you because you can't do Magecraft. You're my friend, Shinji."

Shinji's face went through a series of emotions. In the end, he settled for looking elsewhere.

"... You still took my Servant."

"In self-defense," Shirou pointed out.

"Will you give her back if I promise to never do it again?"

"No. Even disregarding the fact that you can't provide her with Mana, there the problem that the Grail is malfunctional. You would be putting your life in danger over nothing."

"... what the hell do you mean, malfunctional?" Shinji asked, stealing a glance at the two Servant, locked into a staring match on the other side of their room. "It looks like it's working just fine to me."

"If it worked as intended, neither of our Servants would be Anti-Heroes. The Grail has been acting outside its original system since after the Third War. Caster here can confirm it."

"It's true," the Servant agreed. "Originally, the Fuyuki Grail couldn't summon Anti-Heroes such as myself. According to my Master's father, Emiya Kiritsugu, the Grail has been tainted by an entity called Angra Mainyu. Incidentally, that is the name of the Heroic Spirit that the

Einzbern claim to have summoned during the Third War. To the best of our knowledge the Grail will interpret any wish presented by the winner in the most harmful way possible."

"The fire from ten years ago and the state of the Fuyuki Memorial Park are a result of it," Shirou elaborated further. "That's why we entered in an alliance with Tohsaka and Saber. We are shutting down the Grail."

"But... my wish..."

"I'm sorry Shinji, but even if the Grail could make it happen, there's just no telling what else it would saddle you with. That's quite literally a deal with the devil you'd be making. Things like that never turn out well."

Shinji looked like a kid who had been told Santa isn't real. Eventually, he put his face in his hands and sighed.

"It was my only shot at becoming a Magus."

"I'm sorry, Shinji. I really am."

Shinji glared at Shirou but said nothing. He stood up, and once he saw that no one tried to stop him, he left the room without a word. He didn't bother closing the door behind himself and Shirou listened to his friend's footsteps going further and further away, until he could hear them no longer.

Then, he finally turned his attention to his new Servant.

"Rider-san. I apologize for not considering you until now. As you have heard, the Grail is going to be shut down. I know Heroic Spirits have no saying over their own summoning, but I won't have you cooperate with us under false pretenses."

She inclined her head in the faintest of acknowledgments.

"We won't ask you to fight. In fact, we would prefer if you avoided combat altogether. The Grail is powered by the souls of defeated Servants. The more Servants survive, the less power it will have upon manifesting. It will be much simpler to destroy without collateral damage in that state."

"I understand," she replied like she didn't care either way. She probably didn't. If she didn't want or couldn't have the Grail, what investment did she have in the current events?

"Still, I would appreciate your help if you were inclined to give it. Fighting to subdue is exponentially more difficult than fighting to kill. When the time comes, can I ask for your support?"

"... you are my Master," she replied matter-of-factly.

"That doesn't put me above asking. You are free to do as you wish. If you'd rather go with Shinji, then I won't stop you. Right now, thanks to Caster being mostly self-sufficient, I can provide you with all the Mana you need. I only ask that you don't harm anyone and that you won't let anyone harm you either."

Rider had no visible eyes, but Shirou still felt her gaze pierce right through him.

"You are my Master," she insisted. "I shall abide to your will."

"Well... if that is what you prefer, then thank you for your help."

Shirou held out his hand. Rider looked at it impassively but did not take it. Eventually, he retreated it. Her declaration of intents was clear. She would do as she was expressly asked for and not a single thing more.

"We should probably let Rin and Saber in on this development," Caster elected to say to break the awkward silence.

"Yeah. We might as well invite them over for dinner. ... Caster? What's wrong?"

"I... I've left everything on stove! Noooooooooooh!"

Caster's desperate cries echoed through the empty corridors. The haunted reputation of Japanese school buildings after dark wasn't about to decrease anytime soon.

They returned to the Emiya household via Caster's teleportation but it was already too late. Dinner was completely ruined and had to be remade from scratch.

Shirou took that duty upon himself. Cooking never failed to put his mind at ease. After the events of the day he very much needed it.

In the meantime, Caster showed Rider to a room of her own on the second floor of the main building.

On the way there, Satsuki poked her head out of her room and saw the two women.

Rider looked at Satsuki and Satsuki stared back.

"H-hi!" the Vampire greeted somewhat fearfully. Her keen vampire instinct told her that this woman was terribly powerful. She was also intimidated by her appearance and clothing.

Perhaps reading her mind, Caster let out an amused snort.

"Satsuki, this is Servant Rider. She will be staying with us from now on. Rider, this is Yumizuka Satsuki. She is a fledgling Dead Apostle that Shirou took pity upon. She is to be our guest until the War starts properly.

"Please to meet you," Satsuki forced her mouth to say, bowing at the tall woman.

Rider tilted her head curiously, a strand of hair falling in front of her face. "Likewise," she replied shortly.

It was more courtesy than Shirou got and Caster couldn't help but notice it.

"Dinner will be ready in an hour. Rin and Saber will be in attendance."

"Okay. Thanks for letting me know. I'll be in my room until then."

"You do that. Oh, by the way, Satsuki?"

"Yes?" she asked.

"Next time you decide to peek into of a room other than your own, you'd better be prepared to take part in whatever is happening inside."

Satsuki blinked once and then her face turned an intense shade of red.

"Meeeeep!" she squealed before slamming her door close. "I'm sorry!"

Medea snorted in amusement and then proceeded further down the corridor with Rider in tow.

"This shall be your room for the duration of your stay. You are free to come and go as you please. Just make sure to stay out of trouble and try not to waste Mana if you can."

"Understood."

"Good. If that is all, I shall go assist Shirou with the preparations," Caster informed as she turned to leave.

"One question, Lady Medea," Rider called out.

"What is it, Lady Medusa?" Caster asked back, stressing Rider's true name as a warning not to use hers lightly.

"Your Master... what sort of man is he?"

Caster's lips turned into a smile that Rider didn't know how to interpret.

"I shall let you be the judge of that. As far as I'm concerned, there's no other man in this world I'd rather call my Master."

With those words, Caster left for good. If Rider behaved herself she would understand exactly what Medea meant.

Rider watched Caster leave, then opened the door to her room.

It was largely empty, but it was her understanding that such was the style of these type of buildings.

Regardless, it was a room for herself, which was more than what she had in Shinji's employment.

She sat on the tatami, and pondered over the events that had transpired earlier.

Rider had no overarching ambition in the Grail War. Her purpose was to help Sakura by making sure Shinji wouldn't die and by taking on herself all of his frustrations.

Now that Shinji was no longer her Master, or a Master at all, she didn't have to worry about the former, but she was sincerely concerned about the latter.

Who knew what he would be capable of now that he had been deprived of both his hope and his outlet? Rider was no longer in any position to act as Sakura's shield.

Or was she?

Truth to be told, she didn't dare to have high hopes. When it came down to men, well, she had taken a liking to killing them in droves for a reason.

She knew that they weren't inherently all bad, but theoretical knowledge warred direct experience, therefore she'd rather not put any trust in him.

Caster's opinion of him didn't help her either. Someone whom the Witch of Betrayal considered the best person to be her Master was either someone who saw eye to eye with her, or a hopeless fool easy to manipulate.

Neither option appealed to her much.

Regardless, her new Master had said that he would not coerce her in doing anything she didn't want to. She was inclined to believe him simply because he had no reason to lie to her. Not when she didn't have any means to oppose him. Caster too said that she could do whatever she wanted, provided that she didn't give them cause to step in.

Maybe she still could watch over Sakura if she played her cards right.

For the time being, she could only wait and see.

When he felt the Boundary Field go up, right after Medea closed the door, Shirou didn't even stop tending the stove.

"Since when could you do that?" she asked. There was no need to specify what she was talking about.

"Since Misaki," he admitted.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"At first, I didn't know how to approach the topic," he explained. "Then... it actually slipped my mind."

There was a moment of silence, followed by a resigned sigh.

"You are an idiot," she told him flatly. "Now, show me."

Shirou turned down the flame and faced Medea. He held out his hand, facing upward. Light coalesced into his palm and a moment later Rule Breaker materialized.

Caster picked it up gingerly and summoned out her own Noble Phantasm, examining them closely.

"This shouldn't be possible," she whispered. "They are the same in every way that matters. Even I couldn't tell them apart if not for the way Gaia is slowly breaking down your replica."

"Hm," Shirou agreed.

"The implications of something like this are staggering," she continued. "Could you replicate the Noble Phantasms of other Servants as well, or is this only possible because of our connection?"

"I wouldn't know," he shook his head, before turning back towards the stove. "I have yet to see another Noble Phantasm. Rider's weapons aren't one."

"True," Medea agreed. "Her Noble Phantasm would be—"

"Bellerophon, right?"

"Oh? I see, you read her name from her weapons and the Grail System provided you with the relevant information once you had become sure of her identity. I must say, Shirou, your ability is such a cheat."

"I guess so," he replied unperturbed. "Still, I'll use all the cheats I can get to stop this War."

"You won't be hearing any objection from me, darling," Medea said, patting Shirou's back approvingly.

"I'm glad you think so. Sorry for not telling you about Rule Breaker sooner."

"It doesn't matter," she shook her head. "I know it was an honest oversight."

"Doesn't it bother you?" he asked. "That I can replicate your Noble Phantasm, I mean."

"I would lie if I say that it doesn't. Rule Breaker is the only compensation I've got for the fate I was burdened with. Don't worry though. I'm not too upset."

"How much upset it is *'not too upset'?*"

"Well, if anyone other than you did the same thing, I would take only one limb from them in retribution."

"How... magnanimous of you," Shirou replied as a bead of sweat made its way down his forehead.

"I know, right?" Medea smiled cheerfully. "I'm glad you think so too."

This was the woman he fell in love with. How in hell he managed to survive around her so long, Shirou couldn't begin to fathom.

After that, Medea joined him in preparing dinner, and just like that an hour flew by almost unnoticed.

Rin stood behind Saber, who in turn was wearing her combat regalia and holding her invisible sword, ready to strike.

Rider stood a few feet away. The long haired Servant did not betray any malicious intent whatsoever. She just stood with her arms at her side, looking towards the Master-Servant pair.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Caster said casually. "Rin, Saber. This is Rider. Rider, meet Saber and her Master, Tohsaka Rin."

"What is the meaning of this, Caster?" Saber demanded to know. "Why is the enemy Servant here?"

"Hm? Clearly, she is not longer an enemy. Otherwise I wouldn't have let her take a single footstep in this house. Come now, dinner's ready."

She ducked into the living room and Rider followed her after a second.

Rin and Saber exchanged a glance and reluctantly did the same. However, Saber did not remove her armor, or dismissed her sword just yet.

"Wait, Caster," Emiya said as they walked in. "Didn't you tell them about Rider already? Oh, hello, Tohsaka, Saber,"

"I just told them to come over because we had important news," Caster explained. "If I told them Rider was here they would have come before dinner was ready or Rin would have barraged me with questions over the phone, and I believe in showing rather than telling. You know that."

The table was covered in all kinds of foods, like both Rin and Saber had become accustomed to see whenever they dined at Emiya's place. Caster had taken a seat at her usual place and so did the vampire, Yumizuka. Rider sat opposite to her at the head of the table, thus leaving an entire side free for Rin and Saber to seat next to each other.

"Sorry about this, Tohsaka," Emiya apologized in Caster's stead. "It's alright though. There won't be any violence in here. Rider is on our side now."

Rin stared at the purple haired Servant suspiciously and then back to Emiya before letting out a frustrated sigh. It was sound she had become largely accustomed to hear from herself since she started dealing with her fellow Magus.

"I swear, I'm going to age prematurely because of you, Emiya," she lamented, but nonetheless nodded to Saber who let her sword dematerialize, but not her armor. With confident strides, the blond Servant approached the table and sat next to Rider. Rin sat on her other side a moment later.

They all started to eat in a tense silence. The presence of three Servants but only two Masters was glaring and though for a while no one said anything, eventually Rin had to ask.

"So? Where has your Master gone?"

Rider inclined her head, then turned to stare in Emiya's direction. Shirou put up his chopsticks and tugged up his sleeve. Rin's eyes widened progressively at the sight.

"Well... that would explain why you are so nonchalant about having another Servant around the house. Still, how did that happen?"

"Shinji approached me at school earlier today. In hindsight, I should have considered he was trying to isolate me. Long story short, he wanted to make an alliance with me. I told him he should drop out of the War altogether. He didn't like it and sent Rider at me."

"Wait... Shinji was a Master? But he wasn't-"

"He's not a Magus, no. Which is why he had Rider feeding on ordinary people."

"Huh. So, I assume he's dead now," Rin concluded.

"No at all. After I subdued Rider, I explained him in clear terms the condition of the Grail and the futility of participating in it. He left without so much as a scratch on him."

"You... subdued Rider?" she asked looking at said Servant, who shifted in place but made no comment. She was inconspicuously putting food in her mouth. Saber was doing the same while keeping her under careful guard. "On your own?"

"Honestly, she was as tough as nails even though she was running of fumes. If we fought now that's she's properly powered, she'd mop the floor with me."

"Yes," Rider agreed, letting her voice be heard for the first time. She also sounded somewhat mollified at Emiya's assessment of her true strength. Having been defeated by a human must have stung her pride as a Heroic Spirit.

"And are we supposed to trust her just because you are her Master now?" Rin pressed on.

Shirou shrugged. "I can't claim to know Rider well, seeing how I have just met her today. However, so far she hasn't given any indication she cannot be trusted."

"I understand that she has put your friend and another innocent woman into the hospital," Saber observed. "By the looks of it, she didn't have to be forced by a Command Seal either."

"True," Shirou agreed. "On the other hand she stopped herself short of killing them. At the very least, she's not someone who kills callously."

"Where you told not to kill or was that your decision?" Rin asked.

Rider did not answer at all. The silence stretched uncomfortably.

"Rider, would you please answer Tohsaka's question?" Shirou inquired politely.

"... I did not receive any instruction, either way."

Rin let out a huff that was both tired and somewhat relieved. Did she trust Rider's word? Not yet. It was obvious that the Servant was less than thrilled about her circumstances. Either

she didn't like Emiya or her loyalty wasn't so fickle that she would accept changing Master easily.

However she did seem to heed Shirou's commands for whatever reason. Maybe she didn't care who about who gave her orders, or maybe she was just biding her time.

"Well, at least that's a problem we no longer have to deal with. What I'm worried about is how you can handle two Servant at the same time, Emiya."

"Under ordinary circumstances I couldn't, but Caster is largely self-sufficient. Ever since we entered a contract, she has been accumulating all the Mana she could safely drain from the leyline, plus anything I didn't use in the course of the day, without spending more than strictly necessary."

"Right now I have at least a dozen time the Mana a Magus of your caliber possess, Rin," Caster clarified. "If necessary, I could easily reverse the flow and give Shirou and Rider more energy than they could use in a single day."

"That's... something," Rin commented, once again thinking how lucky she and Saber had been in making an alliance with Caster and Emiya. If they hadn't, and they still managed to get themselves an additional Servant, the chances for her and Saber to prevail would have been slim to none. "By the way, how did you manage to subdue Rider and get her Command Seals? Weakened or not, it shouldn't be an easy task."

"Oh, well that was actually easy. I just Pro■■■■■■■■■■"

Emiya's words turned into incomprehensible gibberish. One of Caster's fingers was shining with the light of an active spell.

"Shirou. No," the Witch reprimanded.

"■■■■■?"

"Because it's not good to reveal all of one's secrets, not even to your own allies. You are a Magus yourself. You should know this. Rin herself wouldn't disclose the details of her Magecraft even if she trusts us. That's not how it works."

"Can't blame me for trying," Rin piped up cheerfully, at which Caster shot her a half-hearted glare.

"I would appreciate if you didn't take advantage of my Master's helpful inclination in the future," she warned. "That's my prerogative."

"Well, Emiya-kun is so easy to exploit that I can't really help it."

“Honestly, Rin,” Saber reprimanded with a sigh, then turned to Shirou. “I assure you she’s not as mean as she tries to look.”

“I know, Tohsaka is actually a really nice person,” Shirou agreed.

“Huh. I don’t need to hear that from you of all people, you Fake Janitor,” Rin complained, though she could feel a blush spread across her face. “So, anyway, the current crisis is solved for the time being. We should return our attention to the Grail Suppression System. Caster, what’s our progress on that front?”

The rest of the evening was spent discussing technicalities about the Grail and Mana dispersion methods.

Rider observed the exchange at the dinner table.

It was... odd. The Grail War was supposed to be an all out conflict, not this strangely heartfelt gathering.

Seeing these people working together, putting aside mistrust and personal gains was not what she had expected.

To be honest, she didn’t like it. As they dined peacefully and bantered lightly, Sakura was going through a veritable hell, and none of them were even aware of it at all.

They weren’t responsible for any of it, but their callous ignorance made her feel nauseous.

Would they help Sakura if she told them about her circumstances? She wasn’t sure of it yet, and part of her was afraid they would prevent her from doing anything if they knew she was planning to look out for the young woman who had summoned her.

More importantly, she was certain Sakura didn’t want them to know, because Rider too at the time hadn’t wanted her sister to know how much of a monster she was becoming.

She knew that Sakura would truly break if she dragged these people, innocent and without fault, into her own tragedy. Rider could and would respect that wish.

She didn’t know that her choice would lead only to even greater suffering for everyone.

XXX
