

Chapter 13: A Woman's Standards

To my utter delight, Medea received the leftovers of my dinner with Rin (attended with hastily applied concealer on the back of my right hand to cover my Command Spells) that night even better than she did my scrambled eggs. She refused to show exactly how much she enjoyed it, of course, and merely described it as “adequate,” but she wasn’t nearly as good at hiding her immediate reactions as she ate as she thought she was.

Truly, it seemed that the way to Medea’s heart would be through her stomach.

More telling was the fact that she was waiting for me in the kitchen the next morning, hovering about like she didn’t quite know what to do while she waited but didn’t want to leave either. The only thing missing was her wringing her hands in indecision and chewing uncertainly on her bottom lip.

Cooking was one of the things she didn’t know much about, I remembered again. Something about playing DS games in her spare time to try and learn how? I still wasn’t sure if that was true or something I’d imagined somewhere along the line, but I lost nothing by betting on this particular horse, did I?

“I can teach you, if you want,” I offered to her slyly.

“I’m no one’s housewife,” she retorted, but it lacked some of the heat that I would have expected if she really meant it.

“I’m not asking you to be,” I assured her. “But some people find it relaxing to just turn the rest of their brain off and focus only on preparing the meal. Learning to cook isn’t the worst way of passing the time while we wait for things to get started for real, is it?”

This time, she really did bite her bottom lip. I could see her desire to learn warring with her general distrust of me and the situation, could practically hear the cogs in her head turning as she weighed the pros and cons and tried to look for some angle on how I might use this to take advantage of her, only to come up short, because there really wasn’t a way to do that. Not subtly, anyway.

Several long minutes passed as she fought with herself over it, and I busied myself with making us another simple breakfast in the meantime, leaving her to decide on her own. A gentle touch, I told myself. If I pushed too hard or came on like I was pressuring her, then her walls would spring right back up and I’d lose my chance. The more I seemed to care about it, the more suspicious she would be of agreeing to it.

So I just had to be nonchalant. Act like it didn’t matter to me if she turned me down. As long as she didn’t think it was part of some scheme or ploy, then she just might take me up on it.

“No,” she eventually allowed, “I suppose it wouldn’t be.” She mustered herself. “Very well. Where do we begin?”

I smiled. “Well, like I said, breakfast isn’t really the place to go all-out, but that’s probably why it’s a better place to start. You can do any number of things with eggs, but that just means that there’s an equal number of ways to mess them up.”

I stepped to the side and turned halfway towards her, gesturing to the spot next to me.

“Here. Let me show you what I mean.”

She hesitated for a moment longer, and then slowly walked over to stand beside me, and I was struck then by the fact that she was actually only tall enough that the top of her head reached my chin. That had to put her somewhere around 160 centimeters, which was right around the same height as Rin.

Funny how those figures you read about always seemed so larger than life, but when you actually got the chance to meet them, they were actually pretty average in terms of their proportions.

“So one of the first elements of cooking is knowing what goes with what,” I began, like nothing out of the ordinary was happening. “That might sound kind of daunting, but it’s less about specific spices — memorizing that just comes with experience — and more about knowing what sort of flavors work together and which ones just don’t mix...”

I walked her through the process of making scrambled eggs, a decidedly more Western dish than the sort of egg dishes common in Japan, but so easy to make that it was hard to screw them up. Every decision along the way was explained calmly and patiently, and she observed the whole thing with a solemn, serious expression on her face, her eyes narrowed, her brow furrowed, and her mouth pulled into a tight line.

It was probably the first time since I’d rescued her that I really thought of her as cute.

“For eggs in particular, you can make them any number of ways with any number of spices or extra ingredients,” I finished as I scraped them out of the skillet and onto a pair of plates. “It’s not my favorite, but I’ll introduce you to omelets tomorrow morning. Omurice is more involved than I usually like to get at breakfast, but it can be delicious when prepared right.”

“Omurice?” she asked around her fork, already digging into her own food.

“Rice omelets, basically,” I answered. “Like I said, I’ll show you tomorrow.”

We ate most of the rest of breakfast in silence, interspersed with a handful of questions about the spices I’d used or how to vary up the flavor a little bit more. I answered her patiently and calmly as though this was nothing out of the ordinary, and at least for the time being, she seemed to have forgotten all of the hostility she’d been carrying around for the last couple of days.

But it had to end sometime. Nothing lasted forever, and especially not a good meal, so when I was finished eating, I set my plate in the sink to be washed later and said, “Alright, I’d better get going.”

She blinked at me. “Going?”

“You could call it something of a routine,” I told her. “I meet an acquaintance of mine every morning and check on the other prospective Masters to make sure nothing has gone sideways in the meantime.”

And just like that, her expression closed off and her eyes shuttered. “I see. No doubt, you’re convincing them that you’re an angel that would never dare risk his life in some foolhardy scheme in an event as deadly as the Holy Grail War.”

“After a fashion, yes.” My life kind of depended on it, at least for now. “That’s why I left the house for dinner last night, too. The first sign others are going to have that I might have become a Master is if I change up my routine. As long as I continue on as though nothing’s happened, they won’t have any reason to suspect that anything has.”

Her eyes immediately went to my right hand. “And yet, all any of them needs to do to confirm it is get a look at the back of your hand.”

“Ah.” I grimaced. “Yeah, I’ve...been trying to work out a more permanent solution to that. I can hide them up to a point, but other Masters will be able to sense them once they become Masters themselves, which will make hiding them harder than just wearing gloves or disguising them with makeup.”

But was that concern I detected from her? It was hard to tell where that line was. Was she legitimately worried about my safety, or was she just calling me stupid for taking the risk? She gave no hints in either direction, not even her brow knitting together with worry. She was too practiced at keeping her thoughts to herself to let them loose that easily.

“I see,” was all she said.

And then she turned away and left the room without another word, leaving me to stand there, bewildered, and stare after her.

“...It’s way too early in the morning for this.”

I gave up on trying to puzzle it out for the time being and got moving, finishing my morning ablutions in solitude as I tried not to think too hard about Medea and what she was up to. If I started in on analyzing every little detail, then I’d eventually work myself up into a bunch of paranoid conspiracy theories and borrow stress.

Like that time when I was ten and convinced that Kirei was onto me because I’d had him removed from his status as my and Rin’s guardian. Even now, I still wasn’t sure that he didn’t have some kind of suspicion about me, so I was doubly sure to avoid him as much as possible.

As I pulled on the pair of gloves I’d worn the day previous and made my way towards the front door, Aífe shimmered into existence in front of me, arms crossed.

A sigh hissed out of my mouth. “You’re going to follow me again, aren’t you?”

“You expected anything else?” she retorted with an arched brow.

“In hindsight, I really shouldn’t have. This is going to be a daily thing, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” she said, almost coy, “shouldn’t you be the one telling me that? *Is* this going to be a daily thing?”

“I’ve already explained to you why I can’t afford to stop,” I said by way of answering.

“Then you already have your answer,” she replied. “Until she performs her own summoning and it won’t be feasible for me to follow you without being detected, consider me your shadow for the

purposes of ensuring your safety.” She smirked. “Even then, if that cloak you wanted made pans out, I should be able to follow you without being detected by other Servants or Masters.”

Yeah, there was that little wrinkle, wasn’t there? Well, it wasn’t like there weren’t going to be downsides to this whole situation, and frankly, if one of my Servants keeping an eye on me whenever I was out and about was the worst thing I had to put up with, then it would have been an absolute blessing. Minor inconveniences tended to be better than major problems that way.

“I know better than to think it’s worth getting into an argument with you over this.” Let alone wasting a Command Spell over something so stupid and insignificant. “But I’m expecting you to be unnoticeable. We’re too early into this to risk being discovered so soon.”

She snorted. “Contrary to what some might have liked to think, Master, I *do* in fact understand the concept of discretion and what it is the better part of.”

“So long as we’re clear on that.” I took a deep, bracing breath. “Okay. We should get going.”

She faded away again, disappearing back into spirit form, and I slipped my shoes on before stepping out of the house and into the cool winter air.

Rin was waiting for me again in front of our ancestral house, shivering a little in the cold, with her hands tucked into the pockets of her red coat and her shoulders hunched in on herself. She straightened when she saw me, rolling her shoulders back.

“Waiting for me again?” I teased her. “My, how is a man to take such dedication?”

“Exactly how I said you should yesterday,” she replied flatly. “It’s easier to just do this than it is to deal with your disappointed looks if I went on ahead without you.”

“In other words, this is just a sign of how much you care about me,” I turned it back around on her.

The tips of her ears turned red, although some of that might have been from the chill in the air, because the tip of her nose was starting to turn a similar color.

“Whatever,” she said. “Can we get going now? I don’t want to be late because you took up so much time trying to be funny!”

“I’m sorry,” I said with my most realistic fake sincerity. “Perhaps I can make it up to you? You look cold. Maybe we could share some body heat, to keep away the chill.”

She made a disgusted sound in her throat, her cheeks now warming to match her ears, and she whirled away from me to start walking. I smothered a laugh, but couldn’t stop myself from smiling as I took several quick steps to catch up with her.

“So how are things without me around to lighten up the mood of that old place?” I asked her.

“You’ve only been gone a few days,” she said dryly. “You were gone for *six months* last time, remember? I’ve barely had enough time to realize you’re not there, let alone start missing that ugly mug of yours.”

Translation: she was feeling a bit lonely without me there, but she didn’t want to admit it and she wasn’t going to ask me to move back in anytime soon.

“Ugly, huh.” I rubbed my chin, as though feeling for imperfections. “Weren’t you the one who was just recently telling me that I was still the most popular boy in school, even though I graduated three years ago?”

“Sure,” she agreed easily. “Don’t ask me how, though, because it doesn’t make any sense to me. My only theory is that normal schoolgirls have things so easy that there’s nothing but fluff between their ears.”

Was it bad that I kind of agreed with her? Not about the fluff, but half the reason I had turned down that girl from a few weeks back was because she was a schoolgirl who had no idea what was going on with my life and was in no place to help me with it. Our lived experiences were simply too different.

“Does that mean it’s the same for all the boys who want to date you?”

“No,” she replied succinctly. “It’s just that their brains are all stuck in the wrong head. It’s no wonder they’re so stupid when they’re squeezed down into something so tiny. It’s a miracle any of them got into high school at all, let alone graduate.”

I couldn’t stop myself from snorting, and I hid my laughter behind my hand. How crass of you, Rin.

“What does that mean for Shinji, then?” I asked slyly.

“Shinji’s special,” she said. “He’s just a sentient ball of seaweed that grew into the shape of a person.”

No, tell me what you really think, Rin. As long as she was willing to wax poetic about what a slimeball Matou Shinji was, I was willing to sit there and listen.

I went for the throat. “And Emiya?”

Her cheeks colored a little more, but her poker face was strong enough that she didn’t give anything else away. “A different kind of idiot,” she said aloud. “He may not be a hormonal mess, but he’s too much of a goody two-shoes to realize that he’s being taken advantage of. Even if he does have his admirable traits, that side of him at least is just too gullible.”

Ouch. She really wasn’t going to pull any punches here, was she? Well, I had my own preferences for how Emiya’s love life would turn out, so dissuading my twin sister from pursuing him was all the more for the better.

Those two self-sacrificing idiots deserved each other, after all. For two people who selfishly pursued ideals of selflessness, there should be some reward, even if it was just two weeks of relative respite with someone who completed them.

“When you put it like that, I must be some kind of unicorn,” I said, amused.

She snorted. “Why? Because you turned down Nagano?”

“Nagano?”

Was that the name of the girl who had tried to hand me a confession letter?

“Nagano Miyabi,” Rin said by way of answering. “It was all over school by lunchtime. Half the girls in our year wanted to console her, and the other half were silently cheering about the fact that she hadn’t stolen you away from them. Ayako got a kick out of it.”

I sighed. “Of course she did. How cruel that my own suffering brings her such amusement.”

Nagano Miyabi, huh? Cute name for a cute girl. Unfortunately, it did nothing to change the core problems behind why I’d rejected her in the first place, and I just wasn’t cold enough to take advantage of her affections for my own ends.

Yes, I was aware of the irony. The situation with Bazett was wholly different, though, because the end of the world was a *little* more serious and a lot harder to deal with than a case of blue balls.

“Stop being so melodramatic,” said Rin. “If you didn’t react the way you do, she wouldn’t have anywhere near as much fun teasing you about it.”

“It honestly mystifies me that you take it in stride so much easier,” I told her. “There’s no way you haven’t gotten confessions like that yourself.”

She snorted. “Of course it’s easier. I just got done saying it, didn’t I? All of them are only thinking about one thing, so there’s nothing else I need to know.”

“My, that *is* cruel,” I remarked. “How many boys have been crushed under your heel by that sort of sentiment?”

“It’s not like they really know anything about me.” She waved it off without a problem. “How could I possibly think any of them is a suitable partner when none of them know me anywhere near as completely as you do?”

She caught me so off guard that my feet actually forgot that I was supposed to be walking and I stopped cold, my eyebrows rising towards my hairline as something warm kindled fondly in my chest. She stopped, too, and turned to look at me. “What?”

Did she not realize what she’d just admitted to?

“Is that the metric you use to decide who you want to date?” I asked, almost unable to believe it. “That they have to measure up to *me*?”

For a second, she wasn’t phased, and then the words worked their way through her brain and she started to make the right connections. Red bloomed across her face anew, and she spun away with a whirl of her hair so that I couldn’t see the proof of her embarrassment.

No. This was bad. If she was anything other than my twin sister, I could have been happy, but because she was, this was the one scenario where something like that could only end in tragedy.

Even if it felt like my most closely guarded fantasy coming true.

“Th-that’s not what I’m saying at all!” she insisted. “D-don’t flatter yourself so much, you idiot! What I’m saying is, I-I can’t even consider a relationship with someone who o-only knows the small part of myself he sees at school!”

Now, isn't this interesting? Aífe's voice murmured across our bond. A cold chill swept down my spine, and it had nothing to do with the weather.

Fuck me, I'd completely forgotten she was even here.

"W-well, I suppose that's only fair," I tried, attempting to regain my own composure. "After all, there's no one in this entire country who could possibly measure up to me. If those were your standards, you'd never find a boyfriend at all."

Rin huffed. "I-idiot," she muttered under her breath.

Yes, I am. An idiot who cared in ways I shouldn't for people I shouldn't, all because the man I'd been in a past life had held an affection for them. But those lingering sentiments were also the reason I cared enough about Medea to rescue her and about Bazett enough to save her life, so on the overall, I thought it was a fair enough trade.

No matter how strange it made my relationship with Rin.

An awkward silence hung between us for the rest of the trip to the school, and this time, there was no Mitsuzuri Ayako to break up the tension as we arrived at the front gate, so we had to stand around for a few minutes, neither of us willing to break it.

Eventually, Rin mustered up the courage, and a little louder than she probably meant to, she said, "A-anyway, I'm going to class. I'll see you later on for dinner tonight."

"Right," I mumbled.

"Right," she echoed, and then stood there for another long moment. She shook her head. "Right. See you."

And without waiting for a response, she spun around and made her way towards the main building. I lingered at the front gate for about thirty seconds more, deliberately ignoring the stares of the students who passed me by, and then I shook my own head in an attempt to clear it of the less than helpful thoughts.

It didn't really work.

Halfway distracted, I turned towards the Archery Club's clubhouse and made my own way over, and when I entered, the club's practice was in full swing. Mindful of Aífe's presence now, I focused on the two most relevant members and asked her, *Do you see them?*

Them? Aífe asked in turn.

The girl with the ribbon in her hair and the boy with wavy hair that looks like seaweed, I clarified.

Seaweed... *Ah.* If she were materialized, there would probably be a smirk on her face. *It really does resemble seaweed, doesn't it?*

Matou Shinji and Matou Sakura, I told her.

Matou...? As in, Matou Zouken? This dangerous, 300 year old founder? She asked.

The very same, I confirmed.

Matou Shinji... Yes, exactly like that picture you showed us, said Aífe. *Matou Sakura, however... They look almost nothing alike. In fact, I would have to say she looks more like —*

My mouth twisted into a scowl, and I cut across her, *The story behind that is for later.*

...I'll expect to hear it, then, she told me, probably sensing the difficulty of that discussion.

I turned around and left the archery range before Ayako could catch sight of me, pretending that I myself didn't see Nagano Miyabi trying to watch me from around the corner of the building. She wasn't anywhere near as subtle or as good at hiding as she thought she was.

The only thing I could do about that was hope that she grew out of it and wouldn't try confessing to me again. Well, it wouldn't be long before I had to stop coming to school with Rin in the mornings anyway, so maybe her passions would cool in my absence.

Swiftly and with purpose, I strode out of the front gate, ignoring the curious onlookers who were just now streaming in. There honestly weren't many; my daily trips with Rin had become old news, so most of the school already knew I was coming here in the mornings anyway.

I started in the direction of my new home — which was coincidentally the same direction as my “old” home — but about halfway there, I veered off along a side road and towards an abandoned plot that really had been left in foreclosure hell when the old owners died. Since I didn't much care who it belonged to, all that really mattered was that it was a place I could go and be undisturbed.

It was almost childishly easy to slip in through the front door unnoticed, and although sheets had been laid out overtop of the furniture to help preserve them, a thick layer of dust coated the floors. My nose wrinkled, but there was nothing to be done about it. I certainly wasn't going to go about and clean the damn place.

“No one should bother us here,” I announced aloud.

No sooner had the words left my mouth than did Aífe shimmer into existence, glancing around the place disdainfully. Yeah, it wasn't exactly the Ritz Carlton, was it?

But for what we needed to talk about...

I crossed my arms, feeling suddenly very vulnerable as I gathered the courage to confess one of the secrets I had kept from her and Medea. Unease squirmed in my stomach.

“If you've noticed the similarities, then it can't be helped at this point,” I said, like I was trying to convince myself as much as I was her.

“There are superficial similarities between Matou Shinji and ‘Matou’ Sakura,” Aífe noted. There was no accusation of any sort in her voice, just observation. “But in terms of facial structure, the resemblance is much stronger between her and your twin sister, Rin.”

“Because it's not a coincidence,” I admitted. The urge to move was too strong, so I started pacing along the dusty floor, my shoes thunking on the hardwood. “Sakura is...”

But no, simply coming out and saying it was too simple, wasn't it? It lacked depth. I needed to add some background information, first.

I glanced at Aífe. "You understand what it's like for families of magi, don't you? Even if both of your children are excellent, you can only have one heir. It's part of what makes the Edelfelt and their magical attribute so unique."

Aífe's lips pulled tight and her brow knitted together. Stiffly, she said, "I understand the concept."

Right. Because she'd been passed over for her sister. Of course she understood.

"I wasn't so excellent," I said bluntly, because my lack of talent wasn't important, just what it meant for my family. "Rin was born with an incredibly rare magical attribute herself, so she was an easy choice to make the heir, and Sakura..."

I stopped, readjusted, and added some more context. "When it comes to the quality of my magic circuits, the amount of magical energy I can store, and in general, just raw power, all three of us are equals. The difference is, my magical attribute is ordinary. Normal. Unremarkable. It was safe enough for me to simply marry into a prominent family of magi, because everything that makes me extraordinary is something other families desire for their bloodlines, not their workshops. For Rin and Sakura, however..."

My wife's womb was simply too bountiful, my father had said. Dear old Dad never knew exactly how right he was. Of course, he could never have predicted the ways in which that worked out, either. My element might have been ordinary, but something about my Origin had allowed something *extra* to tag along when "Tohsaka Yukio" was born.

"They're special?" Aífe prompted, and I realized with a start that I'd trailed off into thought.

"Too special," I agreed easily. "Too unique. Their magical attributes were so powerful that there was no way either of them could have been kept away from the world's Mysteries. The only way to protect them was for both of them to be the heirs of a long and strong enough magical lineage. Rin was to be the Tohsaka's, which left Sakura at the mercy of whatever supernatural forces decided to make a victim of her. *Fortunately*," I spat the word, "the Matou have been in decline for the past several generations. They had no heir, and wouldn't you know it, the Tohsaka and the Matou have been allies since the founding of the Grail War."

Aífe made a noise of understanding. "So your family gave her away."

"And Zouken had barely gotten his hands on her before he started implanting his Crest Worms into her body," I said, trying to keep my voice calm. I failed. "Through her...her..."

I closed my eyes, but the image was seared on the back of my eyelids. Sakura, not even seven years old, lying *naked* on the floor as she was violated by Zouken's parasites. My body trembled with the force of my impotent rage, and I took a shaky breath to try and bring myself back under control.

It didn't help.

"The uterus is their favorite meal."

The words clawed themselves out of my throat, raw and horrible, because even just saying it so indirectly twisted my gut up into knots. This, the terrible knowledge I had lived with for ten years, was a major part of why my early teens had been such a nightmare.

My previous self had been distanced from this. The person I had inherited hadn't been so moved by Sakura's plight, because he had the buffer of "it's only a story," and the heavy handedness of her suffering had been a step too far for his "suspension of disbelief."

I didn't have the luxury of such a thing.

"What?" Aífe asked, uncharacteristically quiet.

"The Crest Worms can fit into any orifice that will stretch enough to accommodate their bodies," I told her, and I felt sick just saying it. If my voice shook and cracked, neither of us brought attention to it. "But females have one that is conveniently linked, both biologically and conceptually, to gestation. There are fewer barriers to their integration into the host's body."

Or Zouken was simply a cruel old bastard. Both could be true, and it didn't matter to the end result.

"And Sakura was..."

"Not even seven years old."

"So killing Zouken..." she muttered dangerously. I couldn't bring myself to look at her.

"I didn't lie," I said in a firmer voice than I would have thought myself capable of just then.

"Zouken is every inch the threat I told you and Caster he is. Nothing I said about him or his probable actions is in any way false." I let out a long, slow breath, and the anger dulled into a cool, simmering resolve. "But killing him is just as much about saving one young girl as it is about saving the world."

It was selfish, but... Well, motivations didn't have to be simple or singular, did they? What did it matter that I also happened to have a more personal reason for wanting Zouken and Kirei dead? The really important part was that it would mean preventing a greater catastrophe, whatever else it accomplished in the process.

"And if you get to be the one to do it, well... So much the better, right?"

"It's a happy bonus," I agreed neutrally. "Saving the world means killing the two men who have done my family the most harm."

She snorted. "Don't mistake my meaning, Yukio."

Finally, I turned to look at her, and she was...angry, but not at me. It occurred to me, then, that it was probably the first time she'd ever used my actual name, instead of just calling me "Master."

"I understand revenge," she said. "The feelings that drive it, too. I won't be chastising you for wanting it or even pursuing it. My own wish is born of something just as petty."

"Rivalry with your sister."

“And revenge against the man who took everything from me, in the end,” she agreed. “If you’re expecting me to tell you to abandon the idea, you’re looking at the wrong hero. I’m not some high-minded idealist who thinks it won’t accomplish anything.” She smirked. “What I will do is refuse to let you throw your life away chasing it. You don’t make one move against either of them until we’re all ready. Everything we need to do to ensure they die comes first. Only then will we crush them both beneath our boots.”

Something bloomed in my chest. It wasn’t warm, even though it was tinged with satisfaction. No, it was cold and hungry, and it was content to wait patiently for the woman who had just promised to feed it.

“Aífe,” I said, using her true name now myself, “I think you and I are going to get along just fine.”