

Chapter 15: Attempted Domestication I

Three days of training with Aífe was not magically easier than two.

No, that pun wasn't intentional.

I was improving fast — faster than should have been humanly possible, in fact — and it was so fast that it was noticeable from day to day. On that first day, I'd been trying my absolute best to make my hodgepodge mess of a style work against a woman who had mastered the original martial art it was based upon. On day three, I could already look back at that and frown at exactly how clumsy and inelegant I'd been.

This was the power of a Noble Phantasm whose sheer strength and effectiveness bordered on something like an Authority. For a woman who had occupied a status similar to that of a tutelary goddess, I suppose that only made some degree of sense.

She was compressing years of learning down into a mere two weeks.

Looked at in that vein, it was a miracle that the strain hadn't ripped my muscles apart or torn my tendons to shreds. A little — okay, *a lot* — of soreness was downright tame compared to how badly I could have been messed up under the teaching of someone less capable.

That didn't make dealing with it easier or more fun. It just gave me a better appreciation for how impossible what was happening to me was.

Which, you know, Grail War, Heroic Spirits of the exalted dead temporarily resurrected as gladiators, omnipotent wish-granting device — the idea that any of this ever even have happened would have boggled the mind of my past self. None of what was happening around me right now was something the average modern human could even conceive of as “possible.”

When I woke up on Saturday, I wanted to stay in bed and pretend my alarm hadn't gone off. I felt like one, gigantic bruise, and just the thought of climbing out of the relative comfort of my duvet only to put myself through more of the torture that had left me feeling this way in the first place almost made me want to cry.

Except, I realized as my sluggish brain finally started working, no, Aífe had given me the day off of training to rest and recover. I had a single day's reprieve from my slave driver of a teacher, to do with as I pleased.

Not really, though. The only thing that had changed between yesterday and today was what filled the middle of it. It still had to start with my daily trip up to the school with Rin and end with my nightly dinner with her at home, all so that I could maintain my cover as an uninvolved bystander in the Grail War and greedily steal as much time with my sister as I could while I still could.

Fortunately, I had no intention of making the same mistake I'd made yesterday, so with a groan, I rolled over in my mattress and focused on the image of a mirror shattering in my head. My circuits churned as they turned on, and after a muttered incantation, sweet relief soothed away the pains of my labors with Aífe.

The things I did for love.

Dragging myself out of bed was easier to do when I didn't feel like I was going to be ripping my limbs off in the process, and I went about my morning routine in something of a haze, still not quite fully awake. When I got down to the kitchen some minutes later, Medea was there as usual, waiting for me so that we could have another lesson on breakfast meals.

Unfortunately, as I found out when I opened the refrigerator, there was something that would be putting a bit of a damper on that.

"We need to go shopping," I announced

"Shopping?" Medea asked.

"Mm." We still had enough for today's breakfast, at least. But there wasn't even enough for lunch or dinner, so it was unavoidable. "Last time I stocked up, I only accounted for feeding my own stomach, so we went through things a lot faster than I originally thought we would."

"I see." Her head jerked up and she looked at me with wide eyes. "Wait, *we*?"

"Well, yes, of course." I glanced back at her. "You want to learn how to cook, don't you? Any chef worth their salt knows what ingredients to pick and where at the market to get them. Not only that, any serious chef will personally pick out their own ingredients instead of trusting someone else to know what they're looking for."

Her brow furrowed as she considered what I'd just said.

The fact that I wasn't even lying was the part that was, when I looked back on it later, accidentally genius. While there were plenty of people who weren't particular enough to insist on getting things themselves, professionals were absolutely the kind of people who lived by the adage, "If you want it done right, do it yourself." They liked to know exactly what they were working with, so when they didn't do their own shopping, they had very exacting requirements for what ingredients they used, down to the brand.

In no way was I a professional chef, but I absolutely preferred to use premium ingredients in my food instead of just getting the best possible deal for my money.

"In fact," I said suddenly as an idea came to me, "why don't we make a day of it?"

"What?" she asked incredulously.

"Yeah." I nodded as it grew on me. "Your wish can't be granted, but that doesn't mean your time here has to be meaningless. And even if there's still a lot we need to do to prepare, that doesn't mean we can't take a break every now and again and enjoy ourselves. Why not spend the day out in the city, just doing nothing important?"

It did not escape me that I was, in a way, asking Medea out on a date. I wasn't about to call it that to her face — not when it was almost guaranteed to make her say no — and if she didn't think of it that way, then there was nothing I could do about it, but it was definitely a date.

“If it helps,” I added, sweetening the pot, “it also means you can familiarize yourself with the city. So you know where all of the important stuff is for later.”

“My previous Master already helped me familiarize myself with the city,” Medea replied.

“Atrum was a cruel, arrogant fop who probably spent all of a month in Fuyuki,” was what I countered with. “I grew up here, native born, son of the Second Owner. Trust me, I know the city much better than he did.”

Her lips pursed. “And I suppose you’re going to insist on sticking beside me the entire time? So you can keep an eye on me and make sure I don’t try to go to the Temple?”

That...was actually an unintended side benefit that I hadn’t been thinking of.

“It’s more like you’ll be the one keeping an eye on me.” I smiled. “Aife won’t let me leave the house alone, so if I don’t take you along, she’ll insist on coming herself — in spirit form. At least if I have you along, I won’t look like I’m talking to myself.”

She snorted. “And your true motives are revealed at last,” she said dryly. She looked down at herself and frowned. “Won’t I stand out too much? My clothes aren’t exactly modern.”

“My grandmother’s won’t be either, but they won’t look too out of place,” I responded easily. “I’m sure there’s a dress or two we can pull out that won’t look *too* dated and old-fashioned.”

Hopefully something designed for the weather. If the pattern held in the previous Grail Wars and it wasn’t just the Fourth and Fifth, then the Third should have taken place in late January or early February, so Grandmother’s leftover clothes should be designed for colder temperatures.

Finally, Medea relented. “Fine. If the alternative is staying here to toil over those trinkets of yours, then I suppose going out into the city is the better option.”

I turned away to hide my smile, ignoring the jab. “Then let’s get breakfast out of the way, shall we? Come over here and show me what you’ve learned over the past few days.”

She hesitated for a moment, perhaps expecting me to react more strongly to what she’d said, and then she made her way over to the stove.

This time, Medea took the reins of breakfast making, and I let her have complete control over what we would be eating. For the most part, I just watched, eyeing her choices critically, and I only spoke to correct her when she was in the process of making a mistake. Other than that, however, it was all her.

The end result wasn’t terrible, but she’d been too liberal with the spices, so the flavor was a lot stronger than I was used to. Not inedible, but enough that it all but smothered the eggs rather than accentuating them and emphasizing their natural flavor.

“A good attempt,” I praised her mildly, and her expression soured a little, although that might have been because she could immediately tell what she’d done wrong the instant she bit into her own breakfast.

At least the only way to ruin toast was to burn it, and she wasn't so incompetent to screw up something that simple.

After breakfast had been eaten and the plates set aside to be washed later, I told her, "I'll be going out again this morning. For my morning errands."

"Are you expecting me to come with you?" Medea asked.

"No," I replied. "I'll be taking Aífe along as I have the last few mornings. In the meantime, I had to pull out my grandmother's wardrobe to find something to dress Miss McRemitz in after I healed her, so if you want to go through it to find something to wear for later on, it's in the master suite on the third floor."

She paused. "You're going to trust me in your bedroom?" she said slowly.

"It's hardly mine," I said wryly. "It's not like I brought over everything I own, since this is only intended to be a temporary base until the end of the Grail War. But yes. The master suite is where I'm keeping the stuff I *have* brought over, so I guess you can say I'm trusting you in my bedroom."

"Even knowing how it was I killed the princess of Corinth?" she went on carefully.

"Do you really think I think so little of you?" was what I said frankly. "You're a lot of things, Medea, but very rarely are you cruel to those who don't deserve it." I offered her a smile. "I may not be able to trust you wholly and completely just yet, but I want to believe in the day that I can. The only way that day ever comes is if I give you chances to earn it, the same way you have to if you ever want to be able to trust *me*."

She didn't seem to know how to respond to that.

There was a lot more that I wanted to say, but I left her with that to mull those thoughts over. There was no rushing this, and it was fine if I took my time a little. Wearing down her walls was a marathon, not a sprint.

Playing poker with a brick wall might have been easier, though.

I finished getting ready at a bit of a leisurely pace, stopping by to check on Bazett — no change, which meant she was well on the way to a full recovery — and when I made it to the front door, Aífe was there waiting for me, as usual.

"I'll be taking Medea out for the day later on," I informed her as I slipped my shoes on.

"Taking her out?" Aífe arched one skeptical eyebrow. "Really now, Master. Are you that desperate for her company that you would attempt to woo her?"

"Attempt" might wind up being the most appropriate word for it.

"This and that are two entirely different things," I answered without hesitation. "Whether or not I'm attracted to Medea as a woman, the fact of the matter is that I am the one who pulled her fate off

course. The least I can do is take responsibility for that and ensure that she can enjoy at least some of her time here before the Grail War takes up all of our attention.”

“Do you think modern trinkets and a few hours of mindless distractions are enough to compensate her for the wish she’s lost?” she asked, something strange in her voice that I couldn’t identify.

What an odd question. Or perhaps it only seemed odd because of what I knew and it was actually a perfectly reasonable question.

“Of course not,” I said. “But her wish was never going to be granted, not in this Grail War. If I hadn’t intervened, she would have eventually been defeated and killed no matter what. Or do you think Gilgamesh would let her have her way if she actually made it all the way to the end?”

“Even if she managed to recruit Saber?”

“Even then.” It was the best case scenario for Medea, but even in the best case scenario where everything went right and she recruited Saber, there was one hurdle she couldn’t surmount. “The conditions where Saber can defeat Gilgamesh are specific and narrow, and impossible for Medea to achieve. It’s the same way for Emiya Shirou and Rin’s Archer.”

Aífe hummed. “So she was doomed from the very start, was she?”

“Yes.” I stopped, and here, I dropped my voice a little, as though the words themselves were so weighty that I could barely lift them. “In the worst possible outcome for her... She died without a fight, broken and defeated, and Zouken used her corpse as a puppet to spook the other Masters.”

Heaven’s Feel. I’d never been clear on whether she was tricked into killing Kuzuki or if Hassan of the Cursed Arm did the deed before she could stop him. Either way, the fact that she had been so traumatized that she couldn’t even give Saber a fight had been seared into my brain for the last ten years.

“Medea is useful to me,” I went on, firmer and stronger. “I won’t deny that. I’d be a fool to toss aside a mage from the Age of Gods, especially one so talented. But above all else? I saw a woman who had always been forced to play the same role, and I wanted her to have the chance to break free from it.”

It wasn’t healthy. I knew that. Going into a relationship so that you could “fix” the other person was misguided at best and a sunk cost at worst, and it was arrogant in the extreme to even think you could heal a “broken bird” with nothing but patience, love, and empathy. Problems so deep-seated couldn’t be solved so easily. Even so...

Even so...

“She seems quite happy to play that role,” Aífe noted.

The wish I had that not even the Grail could grant was to see Medea smile. A real, true smile from the heart, free of shadows and burdens.

“Is she?” I smiled. “If she had made it to the Temple, she would have fed on the ley lines, using their power to give herself essentially limitless energy by sapping the life force from the unsuspecting populace. If she was half as cruel as she likes to think she is, she would have taken all of it, and the bodies would have piled up as thousands were sucked dry. Instead, she stopped short of endangering their health, because buried beneath all of that venom is a decent person. A woman who would have been a fair and just queen, if only the gods hadn’t changed her fate so callously.”

A woman who had seen the spectacular waste of life that was Atrum Galliasta’s magecraft and set the orphans he had kidnapped for his experiments free. No, she may have been ruthless — ruthless enough to turn her enemies into tools — but she was not nearly as cruel as she liked to pretend.

I finished tying my shoelaces and turned back to Aífe. “Why the sudden interest? I didn’t think you really cared about her.”

“Perhaps not,” Aífe acknowledged. “Whether her legend was sad or happy makes little difference to me, since my only concern is how she acts now. Having said that, your own perspective on her tells me a lot more about what kind of man you are than you might think.”

Humoring her, I asked, “And what kind of man is that?”

She smirked, and instead of answering the question, she said, “We’d best be on our way, Master. If we spend all morning here chatting, you’re going to wind up being late.”

Of course. Naturally, she wasn’t going to tell me what she thought of me that easily. “Straightforward” did not mean “incapable of keeping secrets.”

Taking those words for what they were, I let the conversation die and left the house. Aífe dematerialized behind me so she could follow in spirit form.

Rin was waiting for me again this morning, and after trading our usual banter, we set off for the school. It was a Saturday, so it would be a half day for her, but she still had to go in for the morning. Of all the parts of the Japanese education system that I thought were frankly superior to the Western way of doing things, this was one of them that I felt was just ridiculous.

My head wasn’t in the game this morning; my thoughts were focused forward, on what I could do to make my “date” with Medea something she could enjoy so the gap between us would lessen a little. I knew immediately, of course, that I couldn’t just repeat Shirou’s date with Saber and expect it to go over the same way with Medea, not the least of which because Saber and Medea were two entirely different people.

I did have one thing in mind, but one thing did not an entire morning make. A trip to the pool, maybe? But...no, probably not. Medea in a swimsuit appealed to a lot of me and for not the purest of reasons, but I couldn’t think she would be willing to bare that much skin in front of me. For that matter, we would have to go shopping for a swimsuit for her first, and there was almost no way she’d even consider asking my opinion on what looked good on her.

Down, hormones. Keep the mental image of Medea in a bikini relegated to idle fantasy.

Well, there *were* a couple of other places we could go, but I didn't want to look like I was trying to buy her affection, so while playing into the bits and pieces I could remember about her hobbies and interests might win me points, it would be better to find an activity instead, wouldn't it? Something empty and ultimately meaningless that we could do together and cherish the memories later.

Maybe she would appreciate the irony of playing laser tag.

My distraction did not go unnoticed by my sister.

"You're quiet again this morning," Rin noted. "What is it this time? And before you say it's me again, I won't be distracted by that a third time!"

"My, I'm getting predictable," I joked. "No, no, it's nothing to be worried about, I just have company today, and I'm expected to entertain her for the duration of her stay, so I won't be able to pick you up from school this afternoon."

"Her?" Rin asked suspiciously.

That was the part she honed in on first? Good grief, Rin.

"An acquaintance from the Association and nothing more, I assure you," I lied smoothly. "It's just that I'm her only contact in Fuyuki, so it falls to me to host her while she's here."

Rin arched an eyebrow. "And now you're hosting her? I thought she was just an acquaintance. Isn't that a step too far for someone you supposedly barely know?"

"Would *you* say no to a representative of the Department of Archaeology?"

Rin stumbled. "W-wait a minute," she stuttered, looking at me with wide eyes, "you're hosting *who*?"

"Well, strictly speaking, I was hoping to get into contact with the Department of Mineralogy, since they're more closely related to the primary form of magecraft you practice." I weaved the lie ever deeper, making up the most realistic and yet most outlandish bullshit that I could. "Unfortunately, there's a lot more politicking involved than I originally estimated, so it's not going as smoothly as I planned."

"H-hang on a second," said Rin. "This doesn't have anything to do with what you said when you came back a few weeks ago, does it? About a scholarship?"

"No, we haven't gotten to that point yet," I told her, "but I'm trying to lay the foundation for it. It's just turning out to be a lot of groundwork, if you'll pardon the pun."

Rin hid her burning cheeks behind her hand. "Geez. You really didn't need to go this far, you know."

And then I said the first honest thing I'd said the whole conversation: "For you, Rin? I would do anything."

She looked away, and this time, she buried her face in her scarf to hide her blush.

“Idiot,” she mumbled. “Why would you even say something like that so sincerely? Dummy.”

Because if we weren't siblings, you would be the perfect woman for me. But that was one confession that would have to remain locked away, never spoken. It made things too complicated — and maybe if I never said it aloud, I could convince myself that it was just a delusion. A passing fantasy from a man who no longer truly existed.

I dropped Rin off at the front gate, and then made a quick stop at the Archery Club to see if Sakura was there or not. Like I'd been expecting, however, she was absent again today, probably recovering from the strain of having to summon her Servant. Shinji, too, which Mitsuzuri so helpfully confirmed for me.

It was almost certain, then. No, it was better to assume this meant what I thought it did than to write it off as nothing and get blindsided later. Assassin had been summoned.

Without Medusa and her requisite setup time for the Bloodfort, would Shinji start moving immediately? It was entirely possible that he wouldn't even wait for things to kick off “officially” before he began trying to sniff out other Masters, or failing that, before he started having his Servant feed off of his classmates.

That was something we'd have to address at some point, but there was nothing we could do about it now, not in broad daylight.

Does this confirm it, then? Aífe asked me across the bond.

It's not a certainty, but it's close enough to count, was my response. *We'll have to keep a more careful watch, in case Shinji decides to start moving early.*

In the end, I had to just put it out of my mind and head back to my new home. The instant the front door clicked shut behind me, Aífe materialized in front of me.

“Does this change any of our plans?” she asked bluntly.

I shook my head. “For now, no. Our objectives remain the same, our methods are still valid, and our ultimate enemy hasn't changed. The only thing that's different now is that we have one more disadvantage than we did before.”

“One more disadvantage?” Medea's voice asked as she approached. I turned towards where I heard her —

“Oh.”

She'd found a dress, something from my grandmother's collection. It was a simple thing with notched lapels and a few buttons leading down from the neckline, with a knee-length skirt and sleeves that went to her elbows, all in a deep, sapphire blue that all but *screamed* “Edelfelt” in capital letters. It was, by modern standards, kind of frumpy and old-fashioned, although by the standards of the time, it would have been considered trendy.

Medea frowned at me. “What?”

She was beautiful.

I cleared my throat and deliberately tore my gaze away. “Shinji and Sakura were both absent again today, so it looks like the Matou summoning took place last night. We may have to worry about early action from them and their Servant.”

“May?” she asked.

“I’m not a telepath, so I can’t tell you what Matou Shinji will be thinking,” I said. “However, I *can* say that he is immature, self-centered, and insecure, and he’s just been handed a weapon and told to do whatever he wants with it. With a Rider, he’d have to be careful not to get her caught. With Assassin? He might be far more indiscriminate.”

Her lips pursed. “Do you plan on doing anything about it?”

“For now? No.” I shook my head. “We’re not ready to deal with Zouken, and attacking Shinji would get his attention. Plus, it’s daytime, so this is technically truce time, where the Masters and Servants are supposed to avoid fighting and revealing the Holy Grail War to bystanders. If we did anything now, Kirei would probably put a bounty out on our heads for all of the other Masters to claim. It’s what happened in the Fourth War when Bluebeard got out of hand.”

With every sentence, Medea’s lips pulled further and further downward, and by the end of it, she was outright scowling. I wasn’t incredibly happy about this either, but I’d already known the consequences of summoning Aífe and stealing the Rider slot out from under the Matou’s nose, I just hadn’t come up with a good solution.

Not *no* solution, because that was the idea behind sending Aífe out to keep an eye on things once the War got started in earnest, but I didn’t consider that a *good* solution, because it had a number of flaws. Not the least of which was the fact that keeping track of an Assassin with Presence Concealment was going to be a challenge from the get-go.

“For now,” I continued, “we go about things as though nothing has changed. Because, for the moment, nothing really has. So...”

I gestured to the door. For a moment, her expression twisted and her brow knitted, like she had something acidic she wanted to say to me, some insult to sling my way, but before it could leave her lips, she swallowed it down and sighed.

“Fine,” she said, sounding annoyed but resigned, “let’s go on this little day trip of yours.”

I smiled. “Try not to sound so unenthusiastic, Medea. Who knows? If you actually try to enjoy yourself, you might find you actually will.”