

## Chapter 12: Prognosis II

We did not, of course, immediately begin sparring right there in the middle of the house. Even if that had been her intention, I would have naturally refused, because even if Medea could put everything back the way it was, it was a waste of time and energy and I much preferred if we didn't break anything breakable in the first place, thank you very much.

No. I went back to my room and got changed into something more appropriate as workout gear: a t-shirt that I wasn't particularly upset about losing, a relatively light polyester jacket, and a pair of pants made of similar material. We couldn't all be Bazett Fraga McRemitz, after all, and rock a pantsuit that was sturdy enough to double as armor. Made of tungsten carbide.

Magic was complete bullshit. News at eleven.

Speaking of the woman in question, I took a moment to check up on her and make sure nothing had changed from the night before, but she was still on the mend, so there was nothing else for me to do for her just then, and I left her be.

Medea was nowhere to be found. She was, however, still steadily drawing on my reserves, so as long as that was true, I was willing to trust that she hadn't run off to the Ryuudou Temple while my metaphorical back was turned. Plus, well, Reikan hadn't called to tell me she'd arrived, and since I'd neglected to mention that little tidbit, she'd have no reason at all to try and bewitch him against it.

That...was actually a total accident. A convenient outcome, but I hadn't actually *meant* to keep that from her. It had simply never come up amid the myriad other things that it felt like we had spent days discussing last night. The Grail War itself had simply dominated too much of it.

I made my way down the stairs and out the back door towards the backyard, where Aífe was already waiting for me. Her ominous red spear was nowhere in sight, which I took to mean we were going to be doing this entirely with our fists, so I set the shinai I'd brought down against the side of the house as I stepped out.

It occurred to me then that a Servant and a Reinforced human trading blows might garner lots of unwanted attention, but fortunately, the way the bounded field on this house was set up convinced the people outside that nothing strange or unusual was going on inside it. As long as the bounded field was up and the front gate was closed, the house itself could be in literal ruins and no one would notice anything untoward.

Magecraft really was convenient sometimes, the inherited part of me couldn't help marveling.

"Alright," I said as I pulled on a pair of workout gloves. These ones were specifically enchanted to protect my hands, for all that they looked completely normal. "So how are we doing this?"

"Like I said," she replied. "I need to gauge where you are before I can determine how to go forward, so you're going to attack me with everything you have and I won't do anything except defend."

A part of me wanted to be offended, but she was much stronger than she looked and a legendary hero to boot. Expecting that I could force her to fight back with my own effort was naive. The best I could hope for was to impress her.

This was going to suck, wasn't it?

“Okay.”

I took a deep breath, in through my nostrils, out through my mouth. In my head, the image of a mirror cracked and shattered, and heat raced along my cool limbs as my magic circuits turned on and energy surged through them.

“Tosaigid (Start),” I began, starting with my activation phrase. “Cach bunfedhmanna athglanaid (Reinforce all basic functions).”

Fire poured through my body as my muscles, bones, ligaments — every single one of them was pushed to the limits of an Olympic athlete, and then pushed further as I used my knowledge of medicinal magecraft to surpass even my sister's Reinforcement limits. A breath left my burning lungs and puffed through the cold, January air as steam.

The ground pushed me forward as I kicked off of it like a sprinter from the starting line. Aífe watched me approach, frowning, although whether that had anything to do with my own performance or the butchered Old Irish that I had used as an incantation, I didn't know or really care.

“Ha!”

I led with a textbook punch, aimed at her face, and she shifted slightly to one side as she used her forearm to push my fist out of the way. Undeterred, my other fist shot for her face, my torso twisting to add power and speed to the blow. This one, she deflected with equal ease. Effortless was a good word. She was expending almost no energy to avoid attacks that would have blindsided even a professional boxer.

That wasn't unexpected. Her Agility was easily her highest stat, but it wasn't the only one that was above average for her class, and even Medea could have seen me coming as long as I didn't catch her by surprise.

In the first place, the idea wasn't to match a Servant, especially not one as focused on direct combat as Aífe. No, I just needed to be good enough that I could match fists with one of the greatest masters of Bajiquan of the current era and come out on top.

I pulled back, retracting my arm, then led with a pair of short, swift jabs that she dodged by tilting out of the way and followed up with a heavy haymaker that she actually blocked, this time. The smack of my arm hitting hers was practically thunderous.

Of course, she still didn't look bothered, although her frown was becoming steadily deeper and closer to a scowl with every move.

Was I truly that disappointing? What was she really expecting of me, even? This, all of this, was my own slapdash invention based upon the diminished sports that had sprung up from the very martial arts I wanted her to teach me. It was only natural that I wouldn't measure up to the sorts of men she'd trained during her life.

My gut burned with indignation, and I redoubled my efforts, attacking her faster with harder blows.

But no matter what I tried, I never landed anything solid. The wind whipped about my body from the speed at which I was moving, my lungs ached from the effort of keeping up with the amount of energy I was expending, and sweat broke out across my body as I pushed myself harder than I ever had before. I got as close to her as I dared, I tried to sweep her leg, I tried to grapple her, but she avoided all of it, blocked what she didn't care to dodge, and might as well have been chasing the sun for all the progress I seemed to make.

And then, without warning, she moved.

There was no way to really, truly encapsulate what that meant. Even comparing it to a car lurching from zero to sixty in less than a second couldn't have possibly captured the sheer abruptness of her leaping into action or the relentless pace that accompanied it. The rain of fists that came for me redefined what I knew of speed and power.

It was like facing down a hurricane.

She was faster than me, by a large margin, and she struck with precise, measured blows that I only barely managed to blunt or dodge around. Every motion was fluid and calculated, every punch perfection, every kick sublime, and her footwork was so incredible that I could have written a book about it.

Her fist came for my face, as though revenge for my own earlier attempts. The skin of my cheek burned as her knuckles grazed it. Her other fist came around. I had to squint against the wind that passed in its wake as I stumbled to the side in a clumsy dodge.

She attacked, and I defended. She struck, and I blocked. My arms and legs throbbed from every hit — and she didn't miss — and my muscles burned from the effort to stay just far enough ahead of her to keep her from landing a blow to my head or chest.

She was toying with me. It was obvious. No, of course, if she wanted to overwhelm me, I wouldn't even be able to see her fists, let alone be fast enough to block them. She was a Servant, and I was just a Reinforced human. She could have ended this at any moment.

Her fist came, faster than before. My eyes went wide, because I knew I wouldn't be able to stop it, and I didn't even have time to squeeze them shut in preparation for my nose being shattered like cheap plywood.

It never landed.

A rush of air blew my hair back, and I panted, heart racing, as I looked past the clenched fist bare centimeters from my face into Aífe's scowl and narrowed, amethyst eyes.

“That’s all?” she asked quietly.

I couldn’t find the breath in my lungs to answer.

“A storied, mythical style of martial arts,” she went on, voice dripping with scorn, “practiced by so many celebrated warriors, capable of slaying even the gods themselves...and two-thousand years later, this is all that remains?”

Was I supposed to apologize? It wasn’t like I had personally had any hand in the degradation of the techniques she had presumably dedicated her life to mastering. I was still technically too young to drink alcohol.

“Again,” she ordered sternly. She jerked her head back towards the house. “This time, bring that training sword of yours. I want to see what I have to work with there.”

I regarded her for a moment, still catching my breath, but, well... This was kind of what I asked for, wasn’t it? I hadn’t known it was going to be quite so rough going into it, but I’d already figured it wouldn’t be something I could half-ass. It wasn’t even an hour ago when she was telling me she expected me to put in my full effort. I wasn’t going to give up before I’d even made it past the starting line, was I?

No. This was one thing I couldn’t afford to quit on. Too much depended on it.

*Nothing ventured, nothing gained.*

I went back to fetch my shinai, and after I’d picked it up, I turned back around in enough time to watch her slice a branch off one of the trees that sat at the back of the property. Like it weighed nothing, she tossed the limb one-handed up into the air, and then the red spear that I knew just *had* to be Gáe Bolg flashed as she jabbed and spun and swung with such lightning speed that I couldn’t even see a vague red blur.

By the time the branch had gone up and come back down, it had been transformed into a crude but workable wooden sword. It wasn’t as polished and smooth as the one I had, bought from a store as it was, but the form was unmistakable and the shape was perfectly serviceable for its intended purpose.

Her spear disappeared and Aífe caught it near one end as it came down to about shoulder-level. She gave it a few test swings and nodded to herself, apparently satisfied.

It took me a couple of seconds to realize I was staring.

I gave myself a mental shake to accompany the physical shaking of my head. Right. Yet another reminder that Servants were very much superhuman and I should expect them to do the craziest, most impossible things I could imagine, as well as several things I couldn’t. My definition of “possible” was going to be stretched far beyond its breaking point in the next two weeks alone; forget about the Grail War itself.

Damn it, freezing up if and when I saw Gilgamesh open his Gate of Bullshit would just get me killed. I definitely had to get used to it sooner rather than later.

“This will do,” Aífe said as I approached, rolling her wrist as she got used to the feel of her new practice sword. “Now. Show me this...stickfighting you’ve been teaching yourself.”

*Strictly speaking, Irish Bataireacht is its own thing, and I’ve just cobbled something together based upon it.* But I didn’t say that outloud, because it wasn’t really the point. I wasn’t going to be holding my own in any Highland Games without cheating, but it should be perfectly workable as it was.

Of course, perfectly workable was probably going to look like uncoordinated flailing to her, but I could at least comfort myself in the knowledge that Shirou was even worse. If she saw him, she’d probably pluck the sword from his hands “before he could hurt himself.”

Okay. Yeah. That mental image made me feel a whole lot better about the asskicking I was about to receive.

A breath hissed out of my mouth and I settled into my customized ready stance, ignoring the way she started frowning before I even actually did anything, and then I kicked off the ground again, racing towards her at speed. *Surpass the speed of sound* — ha. Who had I thought I was fooling back then?

The wind whistled as my shinai cut through it, but predictably, Aífe brought up her own sword and blocked my sweeping swing with a loud *CRACK*. The vibration of the collision wiggled its way up my arm, and still, her frown only got deeper.

Yes, yes, I knew it was a bastardization, I knew it wasn’t something incredible, and I knew it wouldn’t impress her. *Moving on.*

I drew back, and my arm flowed into an overhand chop, but of course, she blocked this one just as easily as the first. The frown on her face was becoming more and more pronounced as her brow knitted together. I didn’t know what exactly was going on in her head, but I didn’t need to in order to feel the disappointment that was percolating there.

There was no helping it. I was a modern human without anything to go on but a handful of sports. If she was expecting me to be some kind of savant who had miraculously discovered the secrets of her long lost martial arts... Well, I’d already proven that I wasn’t, hadn’t I? None of this should have been a surprise to her.

I drew back again, then flew into a flurry of blows, putting my best foot forward. No longer sticking to single, powerful blows, I chained together as many combos as I could, swinging at her with all my speed and sliding from one attack to the next as smoothly as I was physically able.

Still, none of it impressed her. She was like a wall, and her expression became stonier and stonier with each passing second.

My own frustration mounted, and I redoubled my efforts, putting on a spurt of speed and strength I hadn’t known I had before. The crack of my shinai smashing into her crudely, roughly hewn practice sword became as thunder, echoing throughout the yard so loudly that I was almost afraid it would be too much for the bounded field to actually hide.

And still, she was unmoved, both figuratively and literally. She hadn't taken more than a single step back since the beginning.

It was starting to become a matter of pride. Yes, I knew none of what I could do would seem at all remarkable to someone who had practiced and perfected the original, but if I could do at least one thing, at least one technique that would make her raise her eyebrows, even if it was only the tiniest bit, then that would be validation, wouldn't it? It would mean I hadn't pushed myself to invent this bastardized mess for no reason.

It would mean I hadn't wasted the last ten years.

One last time, I drew back, and I took in a swift breath as magical energy flowed down my arm and into the sword in my hand. Something like this, I'd never really pulled it off successfully before, but the idea had stuck with me. The feats of the ancient Celtic martial arts — if I could perform just one of them, that would just have to be enough.

And so I threw myself forward one last time, and this time, I swung deliberately for her practice sword instead of her body. I put everything I had into the blow, and at that moment, I didn't care if my own shinai shattered, because it was just a hunk of wood and it could be replaced.

“Claideam-brisidaire —”

CRACK.

Except it stopped, useless.

My sword-breaker, the same technique this same woman had once used to break Cúchulainn's own sword until it was no longer than his fist, stopped dead on her own makeshift sword. It had accomplished nothing, let alone the feat it was supposed to.

“Sword-breaker?” Aífe murmured. “I see. As always, Master, your use of my tongue is overly literal, and just like this sword style of yours, it's cobbled together from pieces that are technically correct. At the end of the day, however, it's nothing more than a pale imitation, and even there, it fails.”

Effortlessly, she pushed me back, and I stumbled as I lost my balance and had to scramble to stay upright. She lifted her wooden sword above her head, staring at me with cold eyes that made me feel — once again — like she towered over me. I didn't need to be a genius to read her intent.

*Shit!*

I brought my shinai up to block —

“Bruud gine.”

CRACK.

I shut my eyes and turned my face away as my shinai *shattered* in my hand, sending splinters of wood flying. My glove protected my sword hand and my clothes were apparently sturdy enough to protect my body, but something whizzed past my head and a line of white heat drew itself across my nose.

My eyes were open again as soon as it was safe, and I wasn't surprised to find that there was little left of my shinai except for the cracked hilt and a sharp shard that jutted up from it, barely long enough to be called a dagger. Just as the name implied, she had broken my sword the same way she had broken Cúchulainn's.

She had also broken hers. It, too, had cracked and shattered under the power behind that blow, because evidently, an ordinary piece of wood couldn't stand up to the kind of power required to pull off a move like that.

Aífe clicked her tongue in disgust and discarded the broken remnants of her makeshift weapon.

"You truly must not have had much to work with," she commented. "Trying to trace back the modern sports to the ancient martial arts they were based upon, didn't you say? I suppose I should be impressed that you even made it as far as you did, when you likely had little to guide *how* other than the old myths and legends of my heyday."

I didn't reply, trying to bid my thundering heart to calm.

"One last thing I want to see," she said. "Have you studied much in the way of rune magic?"

"Very little," I admitted breathlessly.

The utility of runes was plain to anyone who viewed magecraft as a tool rather than an art or a mystery to be studied. But I had focused almost exclusively on medicinal magecraft, because as useful as runes were, the most important thing to me was making sure my sisters got out of this thing alive, and being able to keep them alive was the thing I felt I needed to know best.

Plus, you know, if I was using my own magecraft against my enemies in the Grail War, then something was very, very wrong.

"Show me," she commanded.

So, after I had managed to catch my breath and cooled down a little, I did.

Needless to say, she wasn't impressed by my rune magic, either.

"There are worse foundations," she said when I was done. "In some ways, starting over from scratch would be an even greater challenge."

*But then I wouldn't have to unlearn some bad habits, would I?* I didn't voice that. Even if it was almost certainly true, my ego had been bruised enough, so I was going to let myself pretend that she was actually complimenting me.

"Two weeks, you said?" she asked.

"Closer to a week and a half," I answered. "Saber will be summoned next Saturday. Things will still take a few more days to really pick up, but Saber is officially the last Servant to be summoned."

She clicked her tongue again. “The timeframe is tight, but if it’s what we have to work with, then we’ll work with it.”

She nodded towards the direction of the house. “Take a half-hour break,” she ordered. “We’ll officially begin your instruction in the martial arts after that, and from here on, you’ll be learning that in the mornings and rune magic in the afternoons. I’m going to take you as far as I can in what little time we have.”

Suddenly, she grinned.

“Heh,” she chuckled lowly. “A month to turn a modern human into a warrior who can outshine the Hound... Sister, are you watching from that wretched hellscape? I’m going to surpass you in every way that matters.”

She turned away and vanished from sight.

I took a deep breath and gathered the shattered remnants of my pride, then turned around myself and headed back to the house for my half an hour’s worth of respite. After a few steps, I realized I was still holding onto the broken handle of my shinai, and with a disgusted scoff, I tossed it away.

*On the bright side, Emiya will never get to see that experience for himself,* I thought with a sort of gallows humor.

The zipper on my jacket came down and gave my sweating body a little air to cool off as my circuits slowly did the same. A hand run through my soaked hair proved that I was going to need another shower before I climbed into bed tonight, but if this was a preview of how sore I was going to be by the end of the day, making that a bath with some Epsom salts to ease my aching muscles was probably a better idea.

I stepped through the backdoor and turned immediately towards the kitchen. I had already had breakfast, but a glass of water to hydrate and a protein bar or something to keep my energy up was going to be essential if I was going to be pushing myself this hard. I was going to need the extra calories and nutrients to build myself up.

It turned out, however, that there was already someone there.

“Medea,” I blurted out before I could think better of it. “You’re here.”

She scowled. “Were you expecting me to have left?”

“Well, no, but...” I hadn’t discounted the possibility earlier, no, but I definitely couldn’t admit that to her. “I thought you might be busy or something.”

She sniffed. “Making your trinkets, you mean?” she asked sardonically.

*Don’t rise to that,* I told myself, almost literally biting my tongue. *Don’t rise to the bait. Whatever you do, don’t rise to it.*



My eyes cast about for something, anything, to change the conversation to safer territory, but there wasn't much in a kitchen except for food.

*What the hell*, I thought. Half the way to Saber's heart had been through her stomach, hadn't it?

"Would you like some breakfast?" I asked her before I could second guess myself.

Her eyebrows rose. "Servants don't need to eat," she told me slowly, like she thought I was stupid.

"I'm aware," I retorted a little more sharply than I'd intended. "But even if you don't need it, that doesn't mean you can't enjoy it."

Her brow furrowed and she regarded me with suspicion, like she was trying to find my angle. That was going to be the hardest part of getting through to her, because I very much did have one, it was just the same one all men had when they were offering to do things for a woman they liked: I wanted her to like me back.

Well, okay, so there were some ulterior motives even behind that, but nothing said I couldn't have multiple reasons for wanting her to like me, right?

"What did you have in mind?" she asked cautiously.

"I don't have time for anything incredibly extravagant," I admitted, "and breakfast isn't really where you go all out anyway. I *am* known by at least one person for making some pretty good scrambled eggs, though."

I just didn't bother very often because Rin had this ridiculous thing about not eating too much at breakfast.

Medea quirked one eyebrow, and before she could even try to hide it, a small, amused smile curled at the corners of her mouth. "And who is this one person?"

"Me, of course," I replied.

She rolled her eyes.

"Of course."

I moved to the fridge and pulled out the carton of eggs I'd bought a few days back and pursed my lips down at it as I plucked two out. Scrambled eggs was a fairly simple meal and it was easy to make, so I wound up eating it whenever I was too tired to be more ambitious, and that meant I didn't have that many left.

*Gonna have to do some shopping*, I noted mentally.

In England, I'd sometimes had bacon to go along with the eggs, but here, toast was going to have to suffice, so I grabbed a pair of slices and some jam — raspberry, of course — then went about preparing the rest after I dropped them into the toaster.

I wasn't a huge fan of cooking, if I was honest. It kept my hands busy, but my mind tended to wander because I didn't find cooking all that engaging mentally. Now, however, I focused the entirety of my attention on the task in front of me, because I needed this to wow her. I *wanted* her to be completely blown away by what someone who knew what they were doing could do with something this simple.

So a few spices went into the mashed and blended eggs as the toaster ticked down. Normally, I just added a little bit of salt, but I used several others to enhance things even more, and I had to remind myself not to overdo it.

Medea watched me work silently and without commenting. Come to think of it, wasn't there something about how she wanted to learn how to cook herself, but wasn't very good at it? I wasn't sure that was actually something about her that I remembered or if it was just a quirk I had imagined up somewhere, though.

Either way, it only took a few minutes to put everything together and a few more to cook it. Eggs were quick like that. And like I'd purposefully timed it to work out that way, the toast popped up, crisp and brown, just as the eggs finished.

Once it was all piled onto a plate — with the jam spread over the toast in a thin layer — I took it over to her at the little table sitting in the corner and set it down with silverware. She hesitated only for a moment, and then took her fork and knife and tentatively started in.

While she did that, I grabbed myself a glass and some water, then unwrapped a protein bar and leaned back against the countertop, eyes fixed on her.

*And the judges are conferring on the score now*, I thought as I watched her eat, approximating my best “Iron Chef announcer.”

Slowly, her face changed, and she went from cautious to pleasantly surprised. Her pace picked up, and the hesitation disappeared. She wasn't shoveling, but she was definitely eating faster than what I thought of as normal speed.

Something in my stomach fluttered, anxious, so I distracted myself some more.

*I don't know, Jim*, I imagined another commentator saying. *The performance was simple, but definitely top notch. I can't imagine the score being any lower than a seven, but it would be a complete travesty if they didn't at least award an eight.*

After the eggs, she went to the toast, and a pleased little hum actually escaped her when she tasted the tart sweetness of the raspberry jam. She ate the second piece with something approaching relish, and she even closed her eyes to savor the last bite.

*And it looks like the panel is about to come to a decision...*

“So?” I asked when she was done.

Small spots of red bloomed across her cheeks, like she'd forgotten I was even there, and she coughed awkwardly into her fist. I could practically see the thought in her head, how she wished she had her cowl up so she could hide her face. "It was adequate."

I smothered a smile.

*Full tens across the board, Jim.*

"I'll make sure to make enough food to bring some back for you at dinner, then."

The last of my protein bar was shoved into my mouth and summarily eaten, and then I drained the last of my water. My glass went into the sink, where I could wash it later.

I would have to deprive myself of some leftovers, but if trying my best with some scrambled eggs got *that* kind of reception? I'd be an idiot not to get her three full meals every day.

"That's not necessary," she began, trying to sound firm and stern, but she'd let enough of her walls slip, if only for that moment, that I could see right through it. "Really, it isn't."

"No," I agreed, "but I want to do it anyway."

I left before she could muster a response, feeling much lighter than when I had walked in through that backdoor. There we go — my first victory in the war to win Medea over.