

## Chapter 16: Attempted Domestication II

On a different day, I might have taken Medea to Shinto by foot, the way we had gone the other night when I showed her the cursed park that had remained behind after the last Grail War. Today, however, it was far too chilly to walk all the way there, and it would take too long besides, so I directed her towards the closest bus stop and we climbed aboard together.

This early on a Saturday, there weren't too many people taking the bus. Most of those who would be were either students, who should already be in class, or salarymen, who should already be at the office, so there were plenty of empty seats to choose from. I picked one right around the middle, and just to make sure Medea didn't feel boxed in or trapped, I slid in first and took the window side.

What a pair we must have seemed, her and I. Although she was youthful enough to be mistaken for a young twenty-something woman, Medea was noticeably older than me, and what a scandal those older ladies behind us must have thought it was.

Way to embody a stereotype, gals.

Well, whatever. Let them point and gossip. I had way more important things to worry about than the nosy opinions of a handful of bored housewives.

Medea and I made the trip to Shinto mostly in silence. Too much of what we might have otherwise talked about was too connected to the Grail War to speak of so carelessly on a bus with other people on it. It wasn't worth the trouble of trying something as far beyond my skill range as throwing up a bounded field on a seat in the middle of a moving vehicle, although the Association might just start actually respecting me if I managed it.

Or Seal me. Because you know. Revolutionary magecraft advances.

The Emiya family's Time Alter magecraft could work in the first place — or rather, Kiritsugu's rendition of it — because it was all internal. It was stationary relative to his body. I knew there was a guy named Araya who had managed to actually make one that could move, or at least I was decently sure, but... Well, frankly, how he did it, I couldn't figure it out. What was it stationary, relative to? Not the sun, not the stars, not the Earth itself. The moon? No, the orbit of the moon was tidally locked, but that didn't mean that the moon itself didn't move relative to the surface of the Earth, or vice versa.

Probably something to do with either his Origin or his magecraft attributes. In which case, yeah, there was no way I was going to do something on that level without that advantage.

Maybe, I thought as the idea occurred to me, if it was stationary relative to the bus instead of the ground? If I treated the bounded field as an internal structure and the bus itself as the point of reference...

Well, that definitely wasn't something I should be experimenting with right now, though. Something I'd have to try later, without any possible witnesses to worry about. Maybe Medea would actually have some ideas on how to make it work.

“So how were you planning to go about this, then?” Medea asked as we crossed over into Shinto proper.

I hummed. “Well, there’s no point in getting our groceries and having to lug them around for the rest of the day, so I figured we’d visit a few places around Shinto first, stop off for lunch around noonish, and get the groceries in the afternoon.”

She accepted this without complaint. “Where to first?”

I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye, looked her up and down.

“Clothing store,” I answered simply, and then elaborated, “so that we can get you a few changes of clothes and you don’t have to wear my grandmother’s hand-me-downs.”

She frowned and looked down at herself, at the old-fashioned, thirties era dress she was wearing, and then nodded.

“All right, then. If you’re going to insist on dragging me around, then I might as well do it wearing something I like.”

Ouch. Sorry, Grandma. You’re just going to have to take one for the team.

It was another ten minutes or so before the bus came up to the shopping district, and Medea and I got off there, stepping back out into the chilly January air. I rewrapped my scarf, just to make sure it hadn’t come too loose during the trip, and reached out to gently touch Medea’s arm to pull her out of her sightseeing.

“Come on,” I said when she turned her head to look at me. I nodded in the direction we needed to go. “This way.”

She fell into step behind me, and I led her over to the department store where I had picked out my own outfit. The automatic doors swooshed open in front of us, and the clack of our shoes against the tile echoed as we stepped inside.

It took me an extra second or two to realize that Medea had stopped following me, and when I turned back to check, her head was swiveling around, like she was trying to take in the whole store at once. The expression on her face wasn’t...*stunned*, exactly, so much as a little overwhelmed.

“Something wrong?”

Her cheeks burned and she cleared her throat. “N-no, nothing at all, it’s just... One thing, I suppose, to know something intellectually and another to come face to face with it.”

Oh. *In other words, even with the Grail supplying you with knowledge about what a department store is, the sheer scale of one can surprise you when you’ve never seen it before.*

“Well, women’s clothing should be on this level. Let’s do a circuit and you can pick out what you like.”

Her gaze snapped to me. “*Anything* I like?”

Against her skepticism, I offered a smile.

“Anything,” I confirmed, and then I held up three fingers. “We’ll limit what we actually buy to three outfits for now, but pick out whatever catches your fancy and you can try it all on to see what you like best.”

She regarded me suspiciously, like she was waiting for the other shoe to drop, but the only shoes that would be dropping today were the ones she decided she didn’t like, back into the box they’d been pulled from. I was going to do exactly what I said I was going to do.

“Fine.”

And so began our circuit through the women’s clothing section of that department store.

It quickly became apparent that Medea had exacting taste, and also that she was going to test the boundaries of what I was willing to buy for her, because the first thing she beelined for had to be the most expensive ensemble that she could have cobbled together, and it *looked* it. From the fabric to the pattern to the cut, it was all impressively designed and impressively tagged.

It was also all hideously ugly when combined together.

Every part of it clashed. The yellow shirt didn’t match the black skirt, neither of them matched the fancy, high-heeled shoes, and the less that was said about the jacket, the better. I took one look at it, raised an eyebrow, and asked her, “Are you *actually* planning on wearing that?”

“You said anything I wanted,” she retorted.

“You’re right, I did,” I said calmly. “I’m sorry, let me clarify that a bit more. Anything you like, as long as you’d happily wear it out of the store and into public. As long as you really, honestly think it looks good on you, then I’ll buy it.”

She frowned. “And if I *do* actually like this?”

“Then I’ll pay for it and you can wear it out of the store.”

She didn’t actually like it.

I should have expected something like this, if I was being honest with myself. With our relationship being what it was, it was only natural that she would take an opportunity like this to see how far she could stretch my patience and just how much I was willing to let her walk over me.

It couldn’t be helped.

With the ridiculous outfit put back, she reached for more sensible things instead of the most expensive stuff she could find, and by the time she was ready to try them on, she’d amassed a small collection of about six different tops, three pairs of pants, four skirts, two jackets, two pairs of hose, and three pairs of shoes.

Naturally, I wound up carrying most of it.

Evidently — and obviously — she didn't really want my opinion on any of it, because she didn't model any of it for me when she tried them on. Instead, she grabbed the outfits one at a time and took them back to the changing rooms, spent about five or ten minutes putting each one on and examining herself in the mirror, and then came back out to grab the next one. I didn't have the honor or the privilege of seeing any of them actually on her.

Eventually, there wound up being two piles. The first and larger was the stuff that would be going back on the rack, and the second was what she actually wanted. Included in the latter was a pair of blue jeans, a black turtleneck, a purple blouse, a black skirt, and a pair of flats for everyday wear.

And then Medea came out of the changing room, my grandmother's dress thrown over one arm, and the jolt of *déjà vu* nearly knocked me senseless.

A beige skirt, a black shirt with long sleeves, and a blue denim jacket — it was her iconic casual wear, the things she wore when she was pretending to be Kuzuki's housewife.

I guess there really were some things that didn't change.

"I can wear this out of the store, can't I?" she asked.

I didn't answer right away. She frowned and her brow furrowed. "Yukio?"

Hearing my own name jolted me out of my reverie, and I shook my head a little. "Oh. Right. Yeah, I don't see why not."

She eyed the smaller pile of her choices. "And what are we going to do with the rest of it?"

"We can have it shipped," I told her. "Arrange for it to be delivered to the house sometime tomorrow or Monday so we don't have to carry the bags around all day."

She looked skeptical, but didn't protest. "If you say so."

With her three outfits chosen, we did just that, and the clerk who rang everything up was only happy to arrange it all for us, although maybe she just had a really good customer service smile. Medea let me handle everything and kept her eyes on my face, like she was waiting for me to wince or cringe when the price tag came up.

My poker face wasn't *that* bad.

We left the clothing store with my bank account a few tens of thousands yen smaller than it was when we went in, and I was astonished to check my watch and realize that we'd spent the better part of an hour and a half just buying her those clothes.

"Where to next?" Medea asked.

I glanced around the district and thought, *Maybe I really should have had her buy a swimsuit.*

Another time, perhaps.

“Next,” I said, “we window shop.”

“Window shop?” she replied, sounding like she didn’t quite understand the term.

I nodded. “I know where I’m going to take you next, but we’re going to go the long way. If there’s anything that catches your eye, just say so.”

She arched an eyebrow as though to question either my sanity or my sincerity. “Do you think a few trinkets and a change of clothes or two are going to buy my trust?”

If only it really was that easy. My family wasn’t the richest in the world or whatever, but we were much better off than most, and even more so than my sister would have been alone in another life. Cutting Kirei and his fumbling mismanagement of our family’s assets out of the equation undoubtedly had something to do with that.

Unfortunately, trust, like happiness, wasn’t something that came with a price tag.

“Nothing of the sort.” I smiled a little sheepishly, and my embarrassment was only half faked. “I, ah, I’m just not...particularly good at this.”

“Good at what?”

“Bonding with people,” I said. “My skill in that area has atrophied, you might say. Making friends hasn’t exactly been on my list of priorities the last ten years.”

I started walking, and Medea fell into step beside me. She glanced around us at the fairly thin crowd, and then decided on the neutral, “No, I suppose it hasn’t.”

Ouch. Even if she’d removed some of the sting because of the existence of an audience, that one actually did hurt a little.

“Business relationships are much easier to maintain,” I went on, pretending I was completely unaffected. “Especially in Japan, where so much of the culture is centered around polite distance, it’s really easy to avoid emotional investment in other people. Doubly so when everyone around you acts their own age and you can’t relate to that.”

“Can’t you?” Medea asked.

My lips pulled into a tight smile. “If we make it through this? Ask me again in ten years.”

When my physical age would finally have caught up with my mental age. Small wonder I couldn’t get along with teenagers when the me in my head was a fully grown adult, with all of the perspective that came with it.

The conversation died for a little while after that, and when I did nothing to attempt to revive it, Medea let her attention wander as she gazed across the shopping center. She didn’t seem to hone in

on anything in particular, and eventually she just took quick glances at new shops as we passed them.

She didn't even look twice at the stuffed animal shop. Even Saber had proven her girliness by picking out a stuffed lion toy, and yet Medea seemed entirely disinterested in them.

"Stuffed animals not your thing?" I asked her mildly.

She glanced back at the Fancy Shop, where all of the highest quality plush toys were sold, but her brow didn't even wrinkle.

"I can't say that they are," she told me. "They just seem too...whimsical."

"Whimsical?"

Medea shook her head. "If you'd asked my younger self, I'm sure she would have insisted on getting one. Perhaps a piglet in honor of my aunt, Circe."

A piglet in honor of... Oh. That was...actually kind of dark, when I thought about it. Cute on the surface, but when you knew the legend that went with it, it took on a much more sinister undertone. And her younger self would have gone for the piglet anyway?

Well. Medea had never been a well-adjusted individual to begin with, but thinking about it, there had to be some kind of underlying core to her that led her to doing all of the things she'd done in her myth, fanatical devotion to Jason or not. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that she didn't actually have a single drop of human blood running through her veins, just varying levels of divinity.

By that measure, I guess you could say she was actually very well-adjusted, considering her relatives.

"I think I understand," I said.

She looked over at me. "You do?"

I nodded. "It might sound a bit strange, but I experienced a similar disconnect ten years ago. After that event, it was impossible to look back to the kid I was before and think of that as being the same person as the one I became. So many of the things I used to enjoy just seemed so *childish*."

Medea's brow furrowed. "Yes," she murmured, "I suppose they would."

We passed several more stores in relative silence, and Medea didn't spare most of them much more than a passing glance. I didn't either — the house didn't need new furniture, for example, and neither of us cared for houseplants all that much, so stores that sold such extraneous things had nothing to hold our attention for longer than the brief second it took to recognize them for what they were and dismiss them.

Medea did, however, pause at the sight of a jewelry store, proving that she was indeed a woman with all of the interests that tended to entail, no matter how inhuman her ancestry was.

"A little much to expect, don't you think?" I asked her, amused.

She jolted, like she'd forgotten I was there. "What do you mean?"

"They're convenient for certain uses, since they're so innocuous and commonplace," I said, skirting around the words "magic" and "mystic codes" because of where we were, "but it sends an entirely different message when a woman asks a man to buy her jewelry. I didn't think we were in that sort of place."

*Yet*, I didn't say, because the conclusion she drew from that would change it to *never*.

It took her an extra few seconds for my meaning to sink in, and a faint flush spread across her cheeks and even to the tips of her pointed ears. A little strange, since I didn't think courtship had changed *that* drastically in the past three-thousand years, but she and Jason *had* skipped many of the usual steps that came with getting the attention of a woman you were interested in.

"I didn't mean that," she mumbled, embarrassed.

"I'm aware," I assured her. "Having said that, spending thousands of yen on clothing is entirely different from spending millions on jewelry. There's a limit to my generosity."

"I understand."

Now if only she didn't sound so put out when she said that.

Eventually, we found our way to an electronics store, my original destination, without stopping to buy anything else, and I led Medea inside.

"What are we here for?" she asked me, confused.

"You'll understand in a moment," I promised her cryptically. "Just stay with me for now."

Her lips pursed, but she did as I said and stayed next to me as I made a beeline for the checkout register. Even with the time of day it was, there were still a few people mulling about, mostly younger kids with their parents and teenagers, and we got a few odd looks from them. To be fair, I couldn't imagine we didn't look a little unusual, even if my clothes and height probably made me look older than I was.

The cashier — a young man probably five or so years my senior — greeted me politely and offered his assistance, and when I told him what I was looking for, he was only too happy to retrieve it for me. A few minutes and a quick swipe of my debit card later, I picked up the bag containing my purchase, exchanged pleasantries with him, and led Medea back out of the store.

"Yukio?" Medea asked when we were walking again, perplexed. "What was all of that about?"

"I bought what's called a Nintendo DS," I told her. "It's a portable video game system you can take with you on the go and play just about anywhere. I also bought a cooking game," and I turned here to her with a smile, "so that you can practice whenever you're bored and don't have anything else to do."

Her eyebrows rose and her eyes went wide. "What?" she asked faintly.

“I can get you more games if you want to try something else,” I assured her, deliberately ignoring her surprise. “I just figured that would interest you the most right now, so I bought it for you to have something to do when we’re not otherwise busy.”

I offered her the bag. “Here.”

She hesitated a moment, and then she took it gingerly, looking dazed and disbelieving. Like she wasn’t used to people being kind to her so openly and freely.

“Thank you,” she said, barely above a whisper.

“I’m the one who took you away from the small bit of happiness you would have found in this Grail War, however fleeting it may have been,” I told her earnestly, just as quiet. “The least I can do is take responsibility for that.”

She didn’t seem to know what to say to that. For once, no venom or scorn was forthcoming, and she was almost meek as she clutched the handles of the plastic bag as though it contained some great treasure.

By that time, noon had rolled around, so I steered us away from the main shopping district and towards a small, homely restaurant. Strictly speaking, it was really more of a tea shop, and I was something of a regular there when I got the time and the impulse struck me, but they did small lunch specials with a couple of different soups and a few kinds of sandwiches. While it wasn’t the most upscale place and it didn’t have the largest range in terms of menu, it was enough for what I wanted out of it.

I found us a small table in the corner, picking up the menus on the way in, and I set one in front of Medea as I took the seat opposite of her.

“A menu?” she asked curiously.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry,” I said. “No better time to eat lunch than now.”

Her brow furrowed. “I don’t need to eat,” she reminded me.

I offered her a smile.

“That doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy it,” I told her again.

She didn’t put up more of a fight. I didn’t know if she thought I was teaching her to cook because I expected her to take over the duties when she became able or if she suspected some other nefarious plot behind our lessons. In either case, the idea that I wanted her to enjoy the food here seemed to throw her off.

“As for the tea,” I said as perused the menu myself, “I know the people of your time didn’t have such a luxury, so I’d suggest finding something herbal, depending on your tastes. Myself, I have a fondness for sweets, so raspberry is something I enjoy, but the bitter flavor of a strong green tea must have some attraction to be so popular here in Japan.”



She blinked and seemed a little thrown, almost like she'd been expecting me to tell her what she should order, down to the number of sugars.

"I'm sure I'll find something," she replied vaguely. I left her to it.

She took twice as long to settle on something as I did, owing to her stubborn insistence on making the choice for herself instead of asking me for advice or my opinions. Like she was overcorrecting for not knowing what any of the soups actually were. The ironic thing was that she eventually wound up choosing the same soup I did, and she paired it with a chamomile tea heavy on light, fruity flavors with a dash of mint.

The clerk was only too happy to take our order, smiling at me and greeting me with more familiarity than was strictly polite — but then, I did frequent this place whenever I had the chance, so it wasn't like she and I were total strangers. The estimated wait was given at twenty minutes, so I exchanged niceties and sat back down to tell Medea.

"She's sweet on you," Medea said almost immediately and without prompting.

I blinked. "What?"

"The clerk," she clarified simply. "She's sweet on you."

"She's nice to me," I corrected, a little incredulous. "I see her at least once a week when I'm not abroad for one reason or another. Of course she's a little more friendly than is normal."

Medea rolled her eyes. "You're so oblivious that it would actually be kind of cute in different circumstances."

I...wasn't sure what to make of that. Was that what they called a backhanded compliment? Either way, I was sure that Medea was seeing something that just wasn't there. Even if she wasn't, that woman really was something like five years my senior, because she'd been working at this shop since the first time I'd visited it, and that didn't work out unless she'd graduated at least a year before I did.

It felt really strange to say, "She's just too old for me," especially to a woman who technically had about three thousand years on me. It was doubly strange, because if I was as old as I felt most days, that young woman would actually be comfortably in my age range.

"It wouldn't matter anyway," I eventually settled on. "It's simply impossible for me to have something as fulfilling as an ordinary romance."

For too many reasons to count.

The topic died there, and an awkward silence fell between us for the rest of our wait. It was something of a relief when our food was ready and we could dig into our beef udon soup, because it gave us a reason not to talk to one another as we ate.

At the very least, Medea seemed to enjoy her lunch, so I had that going for me. Awkward conversations aside, I could count that as a win. Her tea, too, seemed to be something she liked,

because while she didn't start singing its praises, she didn't frown or scowl or spit it out, so there had to be something she liked about it.

Whatever it was, she didn't deign to share it. I should be so lucky.

Unfortunately, on the whole, it wasn't total victory, so things were a little quiet and subdued as I paid for our meals and we left the little tea shop. I'd been hoping... Well, I guess it didn't matter what I'd been hoping. The reality of the situation was that I'd probably been shooting too high for a "first date," even if I wasn't ever going to call it that to Medea's face.

Nothing for it, it seemed.

"Well," I said when we were back on the streets, "I guess we should go do the grocery shopping now."

She arched an eyebrow at me. "No more sightseeing? No more window shopping?"

"Maybe another time," I told her, keeping my last few aces up my metaphorical sleeve. We could come back and buy her some model kits later. Using all my trump cards at once would leave me high and dry if I ever tried again. "Besides, it's best to do food shopping when you've just eaten. It helps keep you from buying unnecessary things to satisfy your cravings."

"Well, you *are* the expert," Medea demurred, half-mockingly.

"Or the closest thing to one you're going to find around here."

I let the implied insult roll off my back. There was no sense in getting angry, even if I was a little disappointed things hadn't gone better today, and Medea had so many walls up to protect her heart that this wouldn't be the last time I had to deal with them.

The Shinto district wasn't without grocery stores, but it was more of a hassle to do all the shopping there and then carry it all on the bus back to Miyama, so we took the bus back to Miyama first so we could do the grocery shopping closer to home. This early in the afternoon, we were once more almost entirely alone, and the trip passed in relative silence.

In contrast, the shopping district was almost packed, and each and every one of them was a housewife, buying supplies for the night's evening meal or else food to last through the coming week. Thankfully, for the most part, they were all too busy to pay us any attention as we joined the throng to do shopping of our own.

For the most part didn't mean everyone.

I wouldn't go so far as to say I was famous around the area. That would just be arrogant. However, there was no way of escaping some degree of notoriety among the community when I'd flown through high school so quickly, and if Rin wasn't actually lying about how popular I was with her female classmates, well, it was almost certain that these women had heard their daughters bemoan the fact that I didn't even know they existed.

That combination meant that at least a few of those housewives paid a great deal of attention when I walked into the district next to a very beautiful, very *foreign* woman, doing the very domestic thing of buying groceries together. It wasn't my plan, and truthfully, it was an oversight I hadn't considered earlier, but it all but cemented the idea that I was in the process of courting Medea.

How many girls, I thought wearily, were going to have their hearts broken tonight?

*We're being watched*, Medea told me unnecessarily, sounding accusatory. *I thought you said the goal was to be inconspicuous?*

*There's refuge in audacity*, I replied half-heartedly. I did my best to keep a placid, neutral little smile on my face, but I wasn't sure how well I succeeded. *It was unavoidable, it seems. I'm something of a minor celebrity in Miyama, because I graduated several years early. Most of these women will have heard about me from their children or seen my picture in the newspaper a few years ago.*

Very deliberately, I didn't bring up the idea of so many girls apparently being infatuated with me. One or two, I could buy, but I still wasn't ready to believe it was as many as Rin had said.

Medea's lips pursed. *And you decided to reveal me like this?*

*Which of them is going to suspect what you really are?* I responded immediately. *Which of these housewives would look at you and think that you're the materialized spirit of a long dead hero? Even if an enemy Master was here watching, would any of them believe I would actually show you in public like this so blatantly?*

"Let them gossip," I said aloud, as much for the benefit of our onlookers as for Medea herself. "It's just harmless rumor mongering."

"You could at least have warned me," she muttered.

"Sorry," I apologized. "I honestly didn't think about it."

She didn't seem entirely happy with that admission, but she let it drop, thankfully. Sensing, perhaps, that this wasn't the time or the place to get into it.

For a short while, the whispers and the stares followed us as we went from shop to shop, and the nosy busybodies who didn't have anything better to talk about wondered who I was with and whether or not we had just come from a love hotel. Medea's frown deepened when she heard those theories in particular, and the tips of her pointed ears reddened — whether from anger or embarrassment, she didn't tell me.

Eventually, however, interest in us died down, because we did nothing scandalous and we bought nothing that might have hinted at something more salacious, like condoms. The nosy housewives went back to celebrity gossip and talking about their neighbors' latest misadventures, and Medea and I continued shopping in peace.

The fact that I was explaining what we were picking up and why seemed only to make our outing look more innocent, which served to decrease interest in our presence even more, and it wasn't long before no one was paying us any attention at all.

Until, of course, we went to buy meat, where the absolute worst possibility manifested.

“Yukio?”

An incredulous voice caused my stomach to drop. Slowly, dreading what I knew I would find, I turned to the owner.

“Rin,” I greeted my twin sister. “Hello.”

Medea, noticing that I had turned away, turned herself to face Rin.

“I thought you said you were going to be busy all day, playing host,” Rin told me.

“I was running low on food, so I had to come out here and buy some supplies,” I said. “I do need to eat, you know. I can’t subsist off of sunlight and universe juice.”

Rin rolled her eyes. “The stupid thing is, I know that’s a reference to something, but I have no idea what.”

*That’s because that movie hasn’t come out yet.*

“I guess you’ll just have to be left wondering, then.”

Rin huffed, and she finally seemed to notice Medea — like she hadn’t seen Medea earlier, because I knew my sister wasn’t that unobservant — looking her up and down critically.

“Is this her, then?” Rin asked bluntly. “The representative from the Department of Mineralogy?”

I almost confirmed it immediately, but luckily, my brain caught up with my mouth before I could fall into that trap. “Archaeology, actually. And yes. This is Galanis Calliope.” Medea’s head swiveled to pin me with an unreadable stare. Obviously, she had a very strong opinion of the pseudonym I’d picked out for her, but she hadn’t exactly come up with one of her own. “She’s staying with me for the next few weeks.”

“Nice to meet you,” Rin said, lying so obviously that it might as well have been stamped across her forehead.

“Charmed,” Medea replied, smiling just as falsely. In perfect Japanese. No, that wasn’t suspicious at all. “I’m afraid Yukio hasn’t told me much about you.”

“I’m sure he was going to get to that eventually.” Rin slid me a short look. “Perhaps he intended for us to meet first, so that you could form an unbiased opinion.”

“Oh, perhaps it just slipped his mind.” Medea faked a laugh. “Things have been quite busy, and they look like they’re just going to become busier soon. Why, I don’t think we’ll be leaving the house much, for that matter!”

“Is that so?” Rin asked, plastering on that too bright smile that she used when she was trying to keep calm. “My, political negotiations sound quite a bit more taxing than I originally assumed!”

“Something I’m afraid you’re going to have to learn the hard way, whether mine succeed or not,” I chimed in, trying to steer the conversation back to safer waters. I had to hope my own smile wasn’t as easy for her to see through as hers was to me. “The Association is nothing but politics, so if you want to go there after you graduate, you’re going to have to develop a head for it.”

“Oh, I’m sure she’ll do just fine,” Medea said pleasantly. I was almost fooled by it. “She seems like a smart girl, she shouldn’t have any trouble, once she gets used to it.”

“I should be so lucky to have such a knowledgeable senior to guide me,” Rin replied smoothly. I almost winced.

“I’m sure Yukio will be glad to show you the ropes,” was Medea’s own reply, just as biting and subtle. “After all, he has several years’ experience already.”

“Oh my.” Rin tittered. “You’re already using his given name? You must be quite close!”

“We’re bound together by a contract,” said Medea, and now it was my turn to look at her, alarmed.

*Medea, what are you doing?* I wanted to scream at her. As it was, it took every ounce of my self-restraint to keep it contained entirely to my own head, because there was no way Rin would miss it if Medea and I started having a mental shouting match.

Rin’s cheek twitched. Her smile gained fragility. “A contract, you say?”

“It’s something of a business arrangement,” I hurried to interject. “Tit for tat, quid pro quo, you know. The usual sort of political alliance.”

“How cold.” Medea sighed theatrically. “We made mutual promises for the future together. It’s not nearly that dry, Yukio.”

“You don’t say.” I could practically hear Rin’s teeth grinding together. “Promises for the future. How *romantic*.”

Okay, this was just getting ridiculous.

With one finger, I reached out and bopped Rin gently on the nose. Her furrowed brow turned to me now, and the simmering fury had quickly turned confused.

“Stop jumping to conclusions,” I told her dryly. “You have a whole lot more to worry about right now than my nonexistent love life. Nothing is set in stone right now in any case, so stop overthinking all of this.”

“Overthinking it?” she sputtered. “This is your future we’re talking about!”

“And there’s a time and place for that.” I glanced meaningfully to the side, at the very public shop we were currently standing in. “I think this is something we should discuss another time, don’t you? When we have a little more privacy.”

She startled, and only then seemed to realize that she'd been ready to do this in front of all of the gossiping housewives, who had sniffed out the scandal and were back to staring at us. I could practically see the gears turning in Rin's head as she realized that anything out of the ordinary she did here would undoubtedly make it back to one or more of her classmates, and there went her reputation as a class idol.

The mask of calm, aloof indifference that she wore for school settling back into place was equally as obvious.

"Perhaps you're right," she said coolly. "Then, I'll be sure to bring it up at a later time." She turned to Medea with that polite, fake smile, gave a short bow, and said, "Have a good afternoon, Galanis-san."

She gave me a short, private glare, and then left. I wasn't sure she hadn't completely forgotten to buy whatever it was she'd come to the store to get.

"Well," Medea said, "she was —"

"Later," I told her, and it was the firmest I'd ever been in anything I'd ever said to her.

I didn't know what it was about what I said or if it was how I'd said it, but she didn't push. Probably because we *were* still out in public, and this really wasn't the place or the time to get into it. Not when the subject of discussion was how familiar I was with one of the other Masters, to the point we addressed each other by our given names.

The rest of the shopping was much more subdued than it had been before. My explanations of what we were buying and why were much shorter and terser, and while I wasn't proud of the headspace I was in at that time later on, I felt that I deserved a little slack, since Medea had met Rin far, far sooner than I had ever wanted.

Was it too much to ask for to keep those halves of my life separate for just a little bit longer?

We had barely gotten back to the yard in front of the manor when Medea finally let loose and accused me, "You never told me you knew that girl *personally*."

"And I've already told you," I replied, hanging desperately to the fraying thread of my temper, even as my gut churned with molten fire, "that there are some things I'm not prepared to trust you with yet."

"That much is obvious!" she laughed. It wasn't a nice sound. "So. What is she to you? An old flame? Your previous lover? She was certainly jealous enough."

*That* hit a little too close to one of the things I had sworn no one would ever be allowed to know.

"She's my sister!" I snapped, and Medea seemed genuinely startled by my anger, recoiling away from me with a look of surprise on her face. It was enough of a shock to help me rein myself in, and I closed my eyes to take a long, calming breath.

“She’s my sister,” I repeated evenly, because there was no putting that cat back in the bag now that it was loose. “My fraternal twin, in case that part wasn’t obvious. Can you imagine why I might be nervous letting you know that one of the people we’re going to have to look out for in a week’s time happens to be one of the few people in my life I actually care about?”

She was silent for a moment, eyes searching my face, and then her mouth set into a thin line. “Yes, I can certainly see the resemblance now.”

Frankly, it was something of a minor miracle that she hadn’t seen it the instant I showed her Rin’s picture. I took another deep breath. It was inevitable that Medea was going to find out. I’d just been hoping that it would be after I’d had some more time to wear away at her walls.

“So now you know.”

“Yes, I suppose I do,” she said bitterly. “I’m guessing you were planning to tell me at a later date? After I had swooned and promised to help you fulfill your heart’s desire?”

I closed my eyes again briefly, and suddenly, I was just tired. Hollow. This entire day had been for nothing. All I’d done was ruin whatever fragile trust we had started to build, because I didn’t account for my sister being in the same place at the same time as Medea.

This must have been how Shirou had felt when he stormed off after his date with Saber. Would feel. Whatever. I didn’t have the patience for figuring out the tenses right then.

“For what it’s worth, now?” I said. “Yeah. I would have told you. When I could trust that you wouldn’t use her against me.”

The look on her face told me exactly how much she believed me. “I’m sure you would have.”

A heavy sigh breezed out of my mouth. It did nothing to ease the weight pressing down on my shoulders.

“I guess there’s no way to know for sure, is there?”