

## Interlude II: Trust and Reconciliation

Tohsaka Yukio was not at all what Aífe had been expecting when she was summoned.

That was, to some extent, in his favor. After all, Aífe had been expecting someone who was a magus to the core: cold, unfeeling, pragmatic, someone who believed she could be treated as though she was no more a person than her spear, like she was a tool, devoid of wants, desires, or emotions. What she had been expecting was someone who made plans without any of her input, who wanted her to be a simple instrument to fulfill his wish without any regard for her own.

She had been prepared to stomach that. Prepared to deal with being ordered to play against her strengths, talked at rather than to, wielded like a cudgel by inexperienced hands. She had been resigned to it, even.

But Tohsaka Yukio was not a true magus to his core. Certainly, he had some of the traits, and he was not entirely without the trappings of that personality type, but with what she'd learned of him, it was easy to see why. Transparent, in fact, and it was in some ways a sad, sorry state of affairs that he had spent so long hiding so much that he had trouble shaking the mindset of subtly maneuvering and manipulating the people around him. Sometimes, he didn't even seem to be aware that he was doing it.

Small wonder there was so much friction between him and Medea of Colchis.

That was another surprise he had delivered to her: that he had a second Servant, one that he had apparently rescued from a terrible fate, and while his motives were not entirely pure, she wanted to shake her head when she realized the depths of them.

It seemed that no man, no matter the age or era, could resist the urge to rescue a damsel in distress.

She wondered who that said more about. Men as a gender, or Yukio in particular?

There was also the fact that he'd intended to summon Aífe in the first place. Another surprise, that someone had sought her out instead of her famous sister, or the Hound to which she'd lost, or even Queen Boudica, famous across all of Britain.

Aífe was used to being passed up. Forgotten. Her legend had ended too early, and so much of it had been overshadowed by the names that lingered more. Scathach. Cuchulainn. Medb. Fergus mac Roich.

And Yukio had called her by name, been excited when she confirmed it. How novel. How exciting.

"Did he think I wouldn't notice? I wonder what he believes he's saving me from. Hmph. This once, I can forgive it."

Surprise after surprise, he was even well-prepared for the Grail War, knew all the competitors and most of the enemy Servants. Prophetic dreams? Unusual, in this day and age, but not impossible. Aífe could accept that and work with what he knew.

Of course, the best surprise Yukio had given her was the simple fact that he was not only willing to help her find a student to fulfill her wish, but that he had volunteered himself.

In that sense, they were both using each other. He wanted a teacher, she wanted a student. The both of them benefited, the both of them could see their wishes granted in each other, instead of relying on some trite wish-granter.

*Do you see this, Scathach? She had thought that night. This boy, ordinary clay compared to your beloved Hound, and I will turn him into the greatest warrior Éire has ever seen.*

Even better, the chance to pit him up against the Hound himself would arrive sometime within this Grail War, because the Hound too was participating. A Lancer class Servant, wielding Gáe Bolg — now, she could twist destiny itself such that even that fearsome weapon could be overcome.

It was only natural, therefore, that things would be rocky amongst the other two. As she had already known: Medea of Colchis would not appreciate someone like Yukio, who had turned subtlety and manipulation into a way of living. That their ill-fated ‘date’ — whatever Yukio tried to claim it actually was — would take a wrong turn was as expected as it was inevitable.

“That will be the greatest challenge of this Grail War,” Aífe murmured to herself, “making those two work together properly.”

It was not an easy task, and it would not be done all at once. Sitting them down and forcing them to work out their problems together would accomplish nothing, so it would be necessary to deal with each individually and maneuver them into reconciling whatever pains they had delivered to one another.

The hardest, of course, would be Medea. Yukio was still filled with hope, a desperate kind of hope that struggled precisely because it knew the consequences of despair, and Medea had long since lost any trace of that. She was bitter, jaded, and unwilling to believe in anything except herself — small wonder, given what had happened in her legend.

She was the one Aífe needed to work on first, and so Aífe waited until Yukio retreated to bed and Medea down to her workshop. What she intended to do down there, Aífe didn’t know, but she doubted it was to Yukio’s benefit.

How convenient it was to be a Servant, that she didn’t require sleep. Late into the night, Aífe crept down into the basement, the room Medea had commandeered for her workshop. Remaining in spirit form the whole way, she looked about, taking in the bare brick walls and the antique furniture. The dagger, the sword, and the cloak remained, half-finished, sitting on one of the tables she had picked for a workbench. The only light was the faint glow of a pair of lamps that hung from the ceiling, dim and weak compared to the rooms above.

In the center of this was Medea herself, half hunched over, stewing in her anger and her dark thoughts. The gifts Yukio had bought for her had been set out of sight, abandoned. It was a minor miracle she hadn’t decided to dash them against the wall.

Really, did she think Aífe hadn’t noticed? Medea’s plans were even more transparent than Yukio’s. The only reason Yukio himself didn’t see them was because he wanted to believe the best in her.

Deciding she'd seen enough, Aífe shimmered into existence, and Medea whirled about with wide eyes, incantation on the tip of her tongue. It died before she could speak it, and her mouth twisted into a scowl.

"What do *you* want?" she demanded. "Come to threaten me on behalf of our *Master*?"

"You two are so perfect for one another that it's actually sickening to watch you circle around each other," Aífe said bluntly.

Medea's face turned red as she sputtered, furious. "You, just what are you trying to imply with that?"

"I'm not implying anything," Aífe retorted. "I'm stating it outright. If this was an ordinary Grail War, the two of you would be leading the other competitors around by the nose."

Medea's scowl returned, but the red faded from her cheeks and her fury calmed now that she didn't think Aífe had been talking romantically.

Who knew? Maybe they were compatible that way, too. Aífe didn't have the experience to say, not when her only relationship in that regard had been forced on her at the point of a sword.

"You're mistaken," said Medea. "He and I aren't compatible in the least."

"It's precisely because you're so alike that you're having trouble realizing it yourself," Aífe told her. "The both of you are too used to doing things your own way, to being the smartest, the cleverest, or just the most knowledgeable person in the room. You're both too used to manipulating other people towards your intended goals, even when that goal is for their own good."

It would be funny if it wasn't also kind of tragic and pathetic. The both of them lived their lives through cunning and guile, and because of it, when they came up against someone who lived the same way, they just couldn't get along.

"He and I are nothing alike," Medea said bitterly. "If anything, he's more like Jason. They're both just as self-centered and cruel."

"If you really believed that, you wouldn't have gone out with him today."

She snorted. "I wasn't under the impression I was given a choice."

"You don't really believe that either."

It was actually getting to be somewhat annoying. What, had everyone forgotten just what her skills were? Aífe was a woman who could see when people were holding back, when there was yet more that still lied beneath the surface. Just because it was more useful in battle for detecting an enemy's hidden Noble Phantasm and in training for knowing her students' limits did not mean that she was unable to use it at all in any other context.

"Don't I?" said Medea. "He's our Master. *You* may be content to follow him around like his pet dog, but that only means that the instant I decide to step out of line, one of those Command Spells will be spent in an instant."

If she pushed Yukio far enough, then yes, but at the same time...

“We both know *that* can’t stop you either.”

Medea scowled, and her hand made an aborted motion towards her chest, as though to grip something. A weapon. Ah. A Noble Phantasm. Whatever it did, it would make Yukio’s hold over her — in the sense of a Master over a Servant — disappear, something that could negate or overturn even Command Spells.

Given her legend... Perhaps something that turned the magic against the wielder, or something that prevented it from working, like her own class’s Magic Resistance.

“How did you know?”

Until just now, she hadn’t. Not for sure. Another thing people kept forgetting, that just because Aife was a hardened warrior who loved a good fight didn’t mean she had no skill for subterfuge or trickery.

“You’re one of the greatest mages to ever live,” Aife said bluntly, disguising the truth. It wasn’t even wholly a lie. “Do you truly expect me to believe that you don’t have some method of subverting even the most impressive of modern magecrafts?”

Medea’s brow furrowed. “Yukio didn’t tell you?”

“He didn’t think he needed to.”

Because he was too willing to trust that Medea wouldn’t take that step, not before he could convince her against it. That optimism was as admirable as it was naive.

Medea burst out laughing. “Oh, how precious! So he’s even keeping secrets from the Servant he summoned himself! My, it seems he truly doesn’t have any other use for you than to make you teach him what he wants to know!” She smirked nastily. “I wonder, would he have forced you to do it with a Command Spell, if you had refused?”

There it was, her own attempts at manipulation — except she was much less kind about it. Aife wasn’t quite sure which version she preferred, because both were insulting, and a pleasant smile no more lessened the sting than a cruel sneer.

“I had no reason to refuse him,” said Aife, letting the accusation wash off of her. In truth, she didn’t think Yukio would have gone that far, although she also didn’t think he would have stopped trying to convince her if she had refused him the first time.

“Didn’t you?” Medea mocked. “A mediocre boy asking you to hold his hand and make him a great warrior — how terribly insulting that must be!”

“Whoever said this isn’t exactly what I wanted?”

Even if it wasn’t exactly the way she’d imagined getting it.

“Come now, you don’t actually believe that, do you?” said Medea, throwing Aífe’s own words back at her. “There must be someone so much better you could work with, someone much more suited to you. I’m sure if you looked —”

“Is this the part where you offer to free me from him so that I can go out and find this theoretical person?” Aífe interrupted.

Medea faltered. Like she hadn’t expected to be seen through so effortlessly, because she too was used to whispering in others’ ears and having them listen to their worst demons. When faced with someone who didn’t have any such demons to tempt, and worse, who could see those temptations for what they were, she could be stumped, at least temporarily.

Aífe sighed. “You’re too blinded by your past.”

Medea’s eyes went wide, and she snarled. “You!”

“Stop letting it rule you,” said Aífe. “It’s precisely the reason why Yukio doesn’t trust you: because you won’t trust him either.”

“And why should I?” Medea demanded furiously. “He promised to tell us everything, and yet he’s still keeping secrets from us! From me! He didn’t even bother to tell me that one of the enemy Masters is his *sister*! How am I supposed to trust anything he tells me at all if he can’t even keep his word!”

“And if he had told you from the beginning,” Aífe said calmly, “what would you have done? Accepted it and moved on, or tried to rope her into some scheme to manipulate Yukio?”

“I,” Medea sputtered, “well, of course I would have — I mean —”

“Don’t even bother lying,” said Aífe. “We both know you would have used her as leverage over him. You’re still planning to do it, even now. And yet, you wonder why he hasn’t told you about the most important people in his life? Knowing what you did to your own brother?”

Medea flinched and wilted. “That...that wasn’t me. It was... The curse put on me made me do...”

Aífe sneered. “You can’t even own up to it? Even if the curse was the tipping point, you were always capable of such a thing, Medea of Colchis. All that curse did was show the whole world exactly how far the kind and generous Princess Medea could fall.”

Medea scowled. Under the weight of Aífe’s words, the guilt transformed into bitter spite, and her spine straightened. “Is that all you’re going to do? Preach at me about how great Yukio is and tell me how rotten I am?”

“If that’s what you’re getting out of this, then you’re not paying attention,” said Aífe. “I’m trying to explain it to you — you’re sabotaging yourself unnecessarily. It’s not that Yukio is keeping secrets for the sake of it, it’s that there are things he can’t tell you unless he can trust you, and every time he tries to give you the chance to earn it, you slap his hand away.” She folded her arms. “Besides, it’s not as though you’re being completely honest with him either, is it? You haven’t exactly given up on the Grail, despite what he’s told us about it.”

Even if she had ever coveted it for herself, Aífe would not have been so selfish as to damn the whole world just for a chance at her own wish. She wondered, briefly, what the Hound would do if he ever found out. What would he even wish for to begin with?

“How convenient that is for him,” said Medea disdainfully. “The Grail is corrupted, cursed, and can’t grant wishes in a way that won’t destroy even the one making the wish — and so we should just follow his lead and do as he asks, shouldn’t we? If we can’t get what we want from this Grail War, we might as well help him get what *he* wants. Right?”

“You were there at that barren park as well,” Aífe pointed out. “You felt it just as clearly as I did.”

“With only his word that it was what he claimed it was,” Medea countered. “How convenient that is as well, that he’s the only one who truly knows what happened there. Do you think if we asked one of the other Masters they would make the same claims?”

Aífe arched an eyebrow. “Which of them? The two boys who were too young to know what happened, the two girls who were too young to know, the woman upstairs who never set foot into this city before a week ago, the girl in the castle who also never set foot in this city before, the old man who wouldn’t care, or the priest who wants to see it happen again? Which of those Masters are we supposed to ask about whether or not the Grail’s corruption cursed that park?”

Medea’s mouth closed, and her lips pulled into a tight, frustrated scowl, because she knew Aífe was right. Much as she might not like it, of the people who had any reason to know what was going on with the Grail and whether or not all those things were true, Yukio was the only one they could reasonably trust to begin with.

Even Medea wouldn’t think that someone like *Matou Zouken* was trustworthy. If she knew what Aífe did, about what that man had done to a young, innocent girl, what he had *been* doing to her for the past ten years, the idea of trusting him would fly right out of Medea’s head.

“As I said,” said Aífe, “you’re letting your past get in the way of things, and it’s blinding you to the situation as it is. You might not like it, but Yukio is the most trustworthy Master in this Grail War who isn’t ignorant of its stakes.”

Medea’s lip curled. “As though that is supposed to make me feel better. Should I just ignore all of the insults and the lies, then? Why wouldn’t it be better to find a Master I know would never tell me a single truth than to work with one who promises that he’ll tell me everything and always finds a reason not to?”

“If that’s the way you think, then go ahead,” Aífe replied. “Sever your contract with Yukio, if you are actually capable of such a thing, and go seek out either the priest who would cut you down the instant you become inconvenient or the old magus who would use your corpse as a puppet. I’m sure they would respect you and set aside their own goals to help you achieve your wish.”

By the look on Medea’s face, she knew just as well as Aífe did that neither of those two would do any such thing. She was just too stubborn and too proud to admit to it, because it would mean admitting that Yukio really was her best option.

Aífe sighed and shook her head, affecting an air of disappointment, the same that had worked on many a student and her own son before. “Is that truly all there is to you? Even knowing it would mean the end of the world, you still intend to chase your wish? Just what kind of Heroic Spirit are you?”

“Don’t you already know?” Medea asked bitterly. “I’m not a Heroic Spirit. I’m a *witch*, the root of all men’s misfortune. Of course my own wish is more important to me than the end of the world that caused my suffering.”

Aífe shifted her weight. A sudden chill descended on the workshop, and even Medea, eyes flying wide open, had to take a step back as bloodlust seeped into the air.

“Then Yukio has already failed,” Aífe said with cold intent, “and I may as well kill you where you stand.”

Medea stiffened, and her fingertip began to glow and her lips began to move as her other hand reached for something — perhaps whatever weapon formed her Noble Phantasm, the one she had reflexively reached for before — only to falter as the suffocating pressure disappeared just as swiftly as it came.

Aífe wondered if Medea would realize what it said about her that she’d been so prepared for violence that she had reacted that quickly to a threat like that. She was willing to bet not. For all that Medea liked to think she was self-aware, she kept missing her biggest and most glaring flaws.

“Yukio still believes in you,” Aífe told her calmly. “He still thinks you can be more than the villain you were in your legend. It’s naive, but in its own way, inspiring. There aren’t many people who would look at the things you did and the suffering you caused and still think it was possible to reach down into the muck and pull you up.”

“Y-you...” Medea breathed, panting from the sudden shifts back and forth. “J-just...what are you playing at?”

From where she’d kept them, Aífe pulled out a pair of gloves and tossed them onto the table Medea was using as a workbench. Medea jerked away from them as though she was expecting them to explode.

“I’m not that naive,” Aífe said bluntly. “I can see that same potential that he does, buried deep inside of you, but I know better than most that reaching one’s potential requires both will and effort. You? You aren’t willing to put in the effort required to be the woman he sees in you. To be *better* than who you are. You’ve already given up on it.”

Aífe smirked. “But I’m also willing to be proven wrong, so until you actually try to use that dagger, I’ll let this farce of yours continue.”

Medea stiffened, the fingers of her right hand curling around empty air as though to grip the hilt of a weapon. Ah. So whatever this Noble Phantasm did, it was small and took the form of a knife or a dagger. Perhaps something that dealt with “severing” contracts? It seemed Aífe would have to watch out for a literal dagger being used.

“How gracious of you,” Medea said, but the slight shake in her voice sapped away some of the venom.

“In the meantime,” Aífe went on, “if you still intend to stay with him until the opportune moment arises, you might want to consider methods of convincing Yukio that you don’t intend to stab him in the back. He intends to keep his sister from finding out that he’s a Master for as long as possible, so if you were to find a way to help him hide his Command Spells from her, it would likely soothe some of the pains from earlier today.”

Medea paused and turned to look at the gloves Aífe had offered. Aífe could see the pieces click together in her head as she came to the correct conclusion.

“I don’t understand,” Medea said slowly. “You’re giving me the tools I need to deceive him?”

“I’m giving you the same thing Yukio is,” Aífe corrected her, “a chance to earn his trust and become that woman we can both see. What you do with it, well, that’s up to you. I’m not holding my breath.”

And then, Aífe turned away and vanished into spirit form, leaving Medea alone — to use the gloves as Aífe had said she could or to continue to wallow in her own stubborn unwillingness to change. But she was willing to bet that Yukio would wake up in the morning to find that Medea had enchanted those gloves to hide his Command Spells from detection, rendering his secret safe from Tohsaka Rin and Matou Sakura.

When she materialized again upstairs in the sitting room, Aífe huffed a breath out of her nostrils and shook her head wryly. Just because she was a warrior famed for her prowess in battle did not mean she was not also a queen perfectly capable of guile. She, too, was more than able to manipulate others through words, suggestions, and convenient omissions, just the same as Yukio and Medea were.

Perhaps, she thought, it was more than just the catalyst Yukio had used which called out to her.