

Interlude S: Ally of Justice

Hero of the Nibelungs, they called him.

What an empty, meaningless title. It was a title befitting a hero who had only ever answered others' prayers, who had only ever granted others' wishes, and who had only ever done as others asked of him. It was a fitting title for a hero who had only ever done what others had expected of him for the sake of others' ambitions.

That was not a hero. That was an errand boy.

And yet, despite having lived his life in such a manner and despite having died in such a manner, people had still seen fit to call Siegfried "hero." They had still seen fit to record his deeds and exalt him. They had still seen fit to laud him for what little he had truly accomplished.

It was a strange feeling, to know his own worth and yet to not feel worthy of it.

No, that wasn't quite it.

The things Siegfried had done and the deeds he had accomplished were indeed worthy of praise. Without a doubt, they belonged to a Heroic Spirit who had gone on great adventures and done great things. As the one who had achieved those glories, it wasn't wrong for him to be glorified, nor was it wrong for others to call him "hero."

It was simply that Siegfried did not feel particularly heroic.

He had helped all of those people and he had completed their requests, but that was only because he had the strength and they had the need. There hadn't been anything more behind it than that. Was it proper to truly call himself a hero simply because he had done for others the things they had been unable to do for themselves?

No, that wasn't quite it, either.

The problem was deeper than simple actions. After all, if you divorced what he'd done from his name, no one would disagree that the person who did those things and accomplished those feats was a hero. It followed that the dragonslayer, Siegfried, should then be called a hero himself, and that such a title was fitting.

The problem... The problem was that none of it had been of Siegfried's own will, for Siegfried's own desires, of Siegfried's own volition.

It would be wrong to claim that Siegfried regretted the things he had done while alive, but it would also absolutely be wrong to claim that Siegfried had died without regrets. No, perhaps it was precisely because he hadn't regretted any of it that had led him to regret his own empty legend, that of the hero the people had asked for who had fulfilled all of their wishes.

Siegfried had never done anything for his own sake. Or more to the point, he had coasted through his own life, agreeing to every request made of him, even the one that he had known would mean

his own death, and he had never once acted to fulfill his own dreams and his own ambitions. Yes, how could you call someone a hero simply because he had never been able to turn down another's wishes, even to his own detriment?

If only it had not taken his own death to realize the emptiness of his life. If Siegfried had acted on his own will to fulfill his own desires, then perhaps nothing would have changed, but at least he could have claimed with pride that he was "Hero of the Nibelungs." Not a mere errand boy chasing down others' requests, but an ally of justice who had done right by all of the people, simply because he believed in its inherent righteousness.

Lady Bradamante let out a long breath, and her hand left his side. It didn't twinge anywhere near as much as it had even just a mere few days ago.

"My apologies, Lord Siegfried," she said as she always did. "I've done what I can for today, but it's still not done."

Siegfried smiled. It seemed he had been woolgathering while she worked.

"Don't worry yourself, Lady Bradamante," he said sincerely. "That you are lending us your aid is already something to be thankful for. Please, don't feel that you have to push yourself for my sake."

She offered him a sad smile. "You are too kind, Lord Siegfried. If it was someone like His Majesty, I'm certain he could have handled this in an instant." She gave a self-deprecating laugh. "Well, I can do at least this much! It may take me longer and more effort, but I swear to you, I *will* break this curse!"

Siegfried inclined his head. "Then I will gladly accept this kindness."

Bradamante let out a gusty sigh. "If only I could join you on your mission to fight the Dragon Witch. But I can't leave Thiers undefended to go off chasing after witches, not while its people still need me. Ah, not that I regret this at all!" she added hastily. "As a knight, there's no higher honor than protecting the people and their lives! Doubly so that they are the descendants of my own people and therefore my king's subjects! It's only..."

She looked away.

Ah, Siegfried thought. It was like that, was it?

"To be trapped in a single place, waiting for something to happen, that is its own brand of suffering, isn't it?"

Bradamante sighed again.

"It really isn't befitting my temperament," she agreed. "Charging forward into battle, facing my foes head on — that is the kind of woman, the kind of knight I am! A hundred wyverns, a thousand wyverns, an army of enemy Servants, I would gladly stare them all down across the battlefield!" She turned, and although there was nothing and no one there with them in the church, Siegfried got the sense that her gaze encompassed the entire city and all its people. "But that is not what Thiers needs me to be."

She turned back and offered him a smile. “So even if it chafes, I will continue to be this city’s stalwart defender! That’s why... I’m sorry that I can’t simply break the curse in an instant.”

“I understand,” Siegfried said, returning her smile. “I’m sure my Master does as well.”

Her smile fell.

“Ah...” She looked away. “Yes, if you say so, Lord Siegfried.”

Yes, there was that, too, wasn’t there? Siegfried wondered if she had even noticed, but he was certain Jeanne and Arash had both noticed it, and given how sharp his Master’s eyes were, she had likely seen it too. The reason behind Lady Bradamante’s distrust of their Masters eluded Siegfried, but the fact that she did indeed distrust them was obvious in the way she talked to and about them. Never outright suspicious, but always with a polite distance different altogether from the respect she gave the Servants.

Siegfried wasn’t sure what to do about it. He wasn’t sure there was anything that *could* be done about it, not without knowing the source of it.

Perhaps he should have asked Arash while the opportunity was still there. Now, it seemed that he would have to wait until the others returned to ask and see if his ally had any greater insight into the situation than he did.

The doors to the church swung open, and as though mentioning her had summoned her forth, his Master stepped inside, face flushed and brow damp with sweat from her “morning run.” While he applauded the initiative in maintaining her fitness, Siegfried also had to lament how it left her unprotected to run through the streets every morning without a Servant to aid her if they were attacked.

He was less concerned about a wyvern or two than he was an enemy Servant, especially another of the Assassin class. He didn’t expect a few lesser dragons to prove much of a threat to her, at least not one that she couldn’t escape with relatively little difficulty, although when he’d said as much to Lady Bradamante a few days ago, she’d been shocked and appalled.

It was baffling that no one else seemed to have noticed. Was he the only one who knew the stench of the Dragonkind that clung to his Master’s bloody sleeve? Was he the only one who recognized that for what it was?

Perhaps it was just a matter of like recognizing like. As a hero who had slain a dragon, he was more familiar than most with their particular mysteries.

“Good morning, Master,” Siegfried greeted her.

“Morning, Siegfried, Bradamante,” she replied. Her eyes immediately honed in on his wound. “How is it?”

Siegfried’s hand moved to his wound of its own accord. It didn’t pain him anywhere near as badly to touch it as it had for the past few weeks.

“Well enough.”

“It’s still going to take me a few more days,” Bradamante told her.

His Master accepted this with a nod. Not happily, but as a matter of fact, a statement of truth, something which had to be considered, accepted, and worked around. She did not whine or complain, she shouldered it willingly and stoically.

And then she ran a hand through her hair and scowled.

“I’d kill for a shower, right about now,” she muttered, so low he almost didn’t hear it.

With a sigh, she sank onto one of the empty pews and threw her arms across the back, letting her head lull onto the wood as she looked up into the church’s rafters.

“I guess it’s kind of pointless to ask if the twins have gotten into contact, considering I’m the one with the communicator,” she said wryly.

“They’ve only been gone three days, Master,” Siegfried pointed out.

“Which means they should be coming across whoever that Servant is pretty soon,” she replied. She spared a glance Lady Bradamante’s way. “I know I said it before, but I *do* appreciate that. We’ve been going by foot most of the time since we got here, and I don’t think we could have convinced that farmer to lend us a couple horses on our own.”

Lady Bradamante smiled brightly. “It was no trouble! Though…” She trailed off thoughtfully for a moment. “It seems that it would have been an easy problem to solve, if you trusted yourselves to your Servants.”

His Master snorted. “Chaldea’s courses on Servants had one thing to say about having them carry us to and from our destinations.”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t.”

Siegfried couldn’t stop a smile, and the short burst of air that hissed out of his nostrils wasn’t quite a snort.

Lady Bradamante’s brow furrowed. “Why not?”

His Master rolled her shoulders in what might have been intended as a shrug.

“It’s considered an unnecessary drain on Chaldea’s resources to have our Servants exert themselves for something so petty. If you’re in such terrible shape that a little exercise and some walking is enough to wear you out, you have no business being a Master of Chaldea — or so the Director liked to say. At this point, though…”

She scowled.

“We might have to rethink that rule,” she admitted sourly. “It was fine when we were crossing a city, but it’s too much to ask for when we’re crossing the French countryside. We waste too much time just getting from place to place.”

And that there was one of the reasons why Siegfried was so certain that whatever misgivings Lady Bradamante had must have been unfounded. His Master was not a cruel or heartless woman, and she did not treat lives as currency.

“I’m sure Mash, Ritsuka, and Rika are fine, Master,” he said reassuringly. “Arash would not allow any harm to befall them. They’re in good hands.”

His Master’s scowl deepened. “I’m that transparent, huh?” she whispered under her breath.

Truth be told, his Master wasn’t the only one feeling the wait. Although he spoke confidently about Arash’s competence as a defender, if he was being honest, Siegfried was anxious as well. It felt like he had spent the majority of his time since his summoning cursed by the wound that still plagued him, and he had never felt so useless as he had hobbling at the tail of the party as they trekked towards Thiers in search of aid.

He, too, was ready to be rid of it and take the fight to the Dragon Witch. For the first time since his death, here was a moment, a conflict with clear right and wrong, and he was to be on the side of justice. And yet, he was cursed to sit it out, barely capable of walking without assistance, let alone fighting, powerless to do anything except wait for an opportune moment where he might fire off his dragon-slaying Noble Phantasm.

It rankled. There was a feeling of impotent frustration in his belly that threatened to boil over almost constantly, and it was tempered only by the knowledge that everyone was doing everything they possibly could to see it fixed as swiftly as possible.

As cold a comfort as it was, he couldn’t do anything except accept it. It wasn’t that he wasn’t grateful, but he was ready to be rid of this wound and the curse that made it linger.

His Master let out a long, slow breath, and then she levered herself out of her seat and back to her feet with one limber motion.

“I might as well eat,” she said. “Did the priest leave anything for me?”

“Ah, yes!” Lady Bradamante said. “There should be a bowl of porridge —”

Master honed in on it immediately and made a beeline for the thick, wooden bowl; Lady Bradamante faltered. “...right...over there.”

That, too, had taken some getting used to.

Master picked up the bowl and grimaced down at the contents, like she had been personally offended. Although that bland, largely tasteless porridge was exactly the sort of thing Siegfried had eaten all his living life, having now tasted the food cooked by this “Emiya” for himself, he could understand the disappointment at having to go without it. He didn’t need food at all, and yet he found himself craving just one more bite of the stew that he had been blessed with tasting.

“Barely two weeks since he took over the cafeteria, and Emiya’s already spoiling me,” Master muttered.

Despite her complaints, she took one of her metal spoons from the kit she carried and started eating.

“If you are so offended by the priest’s generosity,” Lady Bradamante said sourly, “then could you not simply have your Acting Director send you more of this Emiya’s fare?”

Master shook her head and swallowed. “It’s not that easy. A lot of the science and the magecraft stuff goes way over my head, but us just being here is already incredibly complicated and should probably be impossible. Sending food and supplies can be done, but there are limitations on how and where.”

“Limitations?”

Master lifted one eyebrow. “Do you think I’m going to start trusting you with all of our secrets when you won’t trust us?”

Lady Bradamante flushed, but didn’t back down. “I trust you perfectly well!”

“Really?” Master stopped eating long enough to thrust out her hand; the red of her Command Spells stood out starkly on her skin, and it was juxtaposed by the maroon stain on her sleeve. “Then make a contract right now. Become a Servant of Chaldea and help us fix this Singularity.”

Lady Bradamante grimaced and turned her head away, refusing to even look at Master’s hand.

“I can’t,” she said. “The people of Thiers need me —”

“Because you think I’ll use a Command Spell to force you to leave, right?” Master said, cutting across her. “Use whatever it takes to get my way and force you to fight for my goal without any consideration of your feelings, regardless of what it means for this city.”

“Wouldn’t you?” Lady Bradamante shot back. “After all, what use are these people against the good of all of France? My obstinance must be quite the obstacle for you, magus of Chaldea.”

“How convenient that ivory tower of yours is,” Master rebuked. “No one is as just and righteous as you, are they? We’re just a group of selfish wizards who don’t care about anyone but ourselves and accomplishing our own aims. We all think the ends justify the means, no matter how many people we have to trample on to get there. Is that right?”

“Ha!” Lady Bradamante scoffed. “Are you trying to claim that this is all about altruism? Magi are all as you just said: selfish, greedy, and self-centered. I’ve yet to meet a single one worth even half of my weakest, least experienced page!” A moment later, she hastily added, “Except Lord Merlin, of course!”

“You must not have met that many, then,” said Master. “I’ve met at least three that I would call pretty decent people. One of them happens to be the closest thing I have to a best friend, these days.”

“I suppose you count yourself among them?”

Master shook her head. “No,” she said simply, and Lady Bradamante’s indignant anger just deflated. “I’m a lot of things, but I don’t know that ‘decent person’ is one of them. I *was* that kind of person you seem to think I am. I’m hoping I left that behind when I joined Chaldea —”

Master startled and turned away, vaguely in the direction the others had left to travel westward. “Arash?” she asked the air. “Is something happening?”

She fell silent, although by the furrowing of her brow, the conversation continued in her head as she spoke with Arash via the Master-Servant bond. A jolt shot through Siegfried’s belly, an unusual sensation when paired with the persistent ache of the wound carved into his flesh.

Something was happening to the other team. Something unexpected, or at least something they had hoped wouldn’t happen. An attack? Had another Servant been dispatched by the Dragon Witch to crush the others while they were all separated?

And here he and Master were, stuck in Thiers, him too weakened to help and her too far away to contribute at all.

A long moment of tense silence followed, although it couldn’t have been any longer than perhaps thirty seconds. It felt like hours to Siegfried. At last, Master turned back to him, and without preamble, she declared, “The town the others went to is under attack.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Siegfried asked immediately.

Master shook her head. “From here? No. We can at least keep track of what’s happening, though. Romani!”

She held up her wrist and spoke into the communicator. An instant later, a harried Doctor Romani appeared.

“Taylor!” he said briskly. “I’m sorry, I can’t talk right now, the others are —”

“Being attacked, I know,” she cut across him just as swiftly. “Is there anything you can give me? Data, flow charts, profiles on the enemy, anything at all so I can keep track of what’s going on?”

“R-right! Of course! Just give me a minute!” He turned away from the camera and started fiddling with something none of them could see. “Right, so, if I do this... N-no, that’s not it... Maybe here... No, that’s something completely different. Damn it, Da Vinci, this is your field, why is it up to me to try and mess with this stuff?”

Long seconds passed, but nothing changed except Master’s patience, and her mouth drew into an ever tighter line. Eventually, she just shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut.

“Forget it, I’m going to get a look with my own —”

She cut off mid-sentence and gasped, stumbling backwards into one of the pews as her bowl clattered to the floor and spilled porridge over her boots. Her face had become pale and drawn, like all of the blood had drained away, and her mouth flapped open and closed with naked shock.

“That’s...” she whispered, and it was the first time Siegfried had heard anything like awe or fear in her voice. “*That’s* a dragon?”

Siegfried’s gut clenched. “Master?”

“That’s gotta be...almost twice as big as Behemoth,” she said shakily. “If that thing breathed fire, would there even be a town left?”

Oh.

No, it couldn’t be, could it? Of all the dragons that the Dragon Witch might summon to her aid... But it made a degree of sense that Siegfried did not want to believe. After all, if it was just a matter of a dragonslayer, then there were a number of Heroic Spirits who could have been summoned in response. However, that it was Siegfried himself who had been summoned instead...

It must be. For a woman who had already slain a dragon, what dragon would she fear but the greatest and vilest of them all?

“Master!” Siegfried seized her by the shoulders urgently, and he only just remembered to control his strength so he didn’t crush her bones into powder. “Please, that dragon, describe it to me!”

They were two sides of the same coin, after all. Victim and murderer, inextricably linked by fate and destiny.

Master blinked up at him, but turned immediately to her communicator. “Romani!” she barked into it. “That dragon, is that —”

“The output far outclasses any of the wyverns you’ve come across so far!” the Doctor confirmed. “In terms of sheer magical energy and mana density, it puts even a top class Servant to shame! Taylor, that’s the genuine article, a *real* dragon!”

“Master!” Siegfried insisted.

She looked him in the face, and then her eyes trailed down to the glowing marking etched into his chest. Siegfried let go of her and recoiled, because that all but confirmed it, didn’t it?

“Siegfried,” she began with quiet haste, “that mark on your chest, is that —”

“Yes,” Siegfried said. “This mark is the mark of the blood of the dragon that I bathed in. It marks my Noble Phantasm, the armor of the evil dragon gained by killing it and taking its body as spoils. It binds us together, a symbol of our shared destiny.”

“Then,” she said, “a dragon that has a symbol just like that on its chest would be...”

Siegfried closed his eyes and inclined his head.

“That’s correct, Master. That there is a dragon bearing this symbol on its chest attacking the others can mean one thing and one thing only.”

He sucked in a deep breath. The wound just below his ribs throbbed, as though to remind him that he was in no shape to go charging into battle against the greatest enemy he had ever faced.

“The Dragon Witch has called forth my old nemesis,” he said solemnly. “Once more, the evil dragon, Fafnir, now walks this Earth.”

Master whirled about towards the doors, as though she was going to sprint to the other team’s aid right then and there, but she spun back around halfway there and stalked down the aisle. A low buzz began to hum in the background from the walls, the ceiling, and the floor, as though the entire cathedral was about to come alive.

She looked down at her Command Spells, brow knitted together.

“If Arash used his Noble Phantasm,” she began.

“It may be enough to defeat Fafnir, but it would at least force a retreat,” Siegfried agreed. “Master, Lord Arash will do whatever he deems is necessary. There’s no need to use your Command Spells.”

His Master’s restless energy matched his own. It was not in Siegfried to sit and wait, to be so passive when the enemy was clear and the goal unambiguous. He wanted to race off himself, to chase down the dragon and cast it from the sky with his Noble Phantasm. He wanted to be strong enough that he *could* do just that. Ritsuka, Rika, Mash, Jeanne, they were all in danger, and he was the only one strong enough to protect them from the evil dragon, if only the wound in his side was gone.

But he wasn’t and he couldn’t. The wound remained. He was stuck in this church, unable to do anything but *wait*.

“Romani!” Master barked instead into her communicator. “Send Emiya! Give them *some* kind of backup!”

“I-I can’t!” the Doctor replied. “The interference from such a huge concentration of magical energy is throwing off our instruments! I can’t guarantee exactly where he’ll land!”

“Send him anyway!” Master snarled. “What good is holding onto emergency backup if you can’t rely on him in an emergency? He just needs to *get here!* Rika can use a Command Spell to bring him closer if she —”

“I-incoming enemy Servant!” Romani shouted. “Location, he’s on his way to Thiers, heading directly towards you!”

Lady Bradamante gasped.

Doctor Romani’s image turned to Master with wide eyes.

“This Saint Graph reading — Taylor, it’s *Dracul*.”

Master jerked as though she'd been slapped, her mouth moving silently for a moment as she processed the news. The name meant little to Siegfried, because it wasn't one he immediately recognized.

But if the expression on his Master's face was any indication, he was not a foe to be taken lightly.

“Fuck.”