

Chapter LXXVIII: Dreamcatcher

If I dreamt at all after being drawn into Aífe's dream, then by the time I woke up the next morning, I didn't remember any of it. They were, at least, apparently decent enough, because I felt well-rested and energized, and not at all like I'd spent a significant portion of my night watching one of my Servants almost literally tackle her demons.

I was, however, on my own as I did my morning workouts. Ritsuka and Rika had taken Aífe's offer of a day off and decided to sleep in instead of getting up and doing at least a light workout, something they might come to regret tomorrow, when they were going to be back on their previous schedule and found themselves less prepared to wake up so early.

Fortunately, Fou also decided not to come in at the same time, so that little distraction wasn't present to throw me off. Small mercies. Maybe he was just as leery about being in the same room as me by himself as I was him.

Whatever the reason, I was glad not to have to deal with him. Someday, I would figure out why we reacted the way we did to each other, but it didn't look like it was going to be anytime soon.

After my workout, I went back to my room and finished my daily ablutions, getting a hot shower that I lingered in for just a few extra minutes. Then, I went to the cafeteria to get some breakfast. Emiya was only too happy to burden me with a tray of homemade waffles, a few rashers of bacon, and a glass of orange juice.

I'd said it before and I'd keep saying it: we were screwed as soon as we lost him.

It was as I was halfway through eating that Romani stumbled, haggard and exhausted, into the cafeteria to grab a cup of coffee. He looked like it was the worst thing in the world that he had to actually wait for the machine to finish spitting out that black sludge before he could drink it.

"Romani?" I asked.

He didn't answer me right away, but once his cup was full, he staggered over to the table I'd picked to sit at, dropped heavily down into the seat, and then took three large gulps of his caffeinated poison. Only then did he let out a ragged sigh and give me a wan smile.

"Good morning, Taylor."

"You look like shit," I told him bluntly.

Romani grimaced and dragged a hand down his face. Heavy bags hung from under his bloodshot eyes.

"The Director didn't sleep so well last night," he told me, "which means that *I* didn't sleep so well, either."

My brow furrowed. "How many?"

“Six,” he answered.

That...wasn't fun, but it could be worse. Like staying up for three days straight, sustained only by coffee and stimulants, the way he had been for most of the week leading up to our deployment into Rome.

“Six hours?”

Romani shook his head. “Six times,” he clarified. “She woke up six times last night.”

That, on the other hand, *did* count as worse.

My lips pursed. “Was she...?”

She'd seemed okay when we were talking to her yesterday, if understandably frazzled, but one of the things we'd worried about was that she'd start experiencing suicidal thoughts. That was part of why Romani and Da Vinci had kept her in the infirmary overnight, to my understanding. So they could keep a closer watch on her than they could if she went back to her room by herself.

“Just nightmares, thankfully,” said Romani. “I know it doesn't sound great to put it that way, but since it could have been a whole lot worse, I'm thankful that it's *just* nightmares, for now. My body, unfortunately, is not.” He sighed again. “And Da Vinci still hasn't given me back my stims, so I'm feeling it now.”

My gut twisted a little, but I wasn't sure there was anything that could have been done about it. Even if we *hadn't* been stuck inside of Aífe's dream last night, the fact that Romani wasn't saying anything about how deeply we'd slept meant that no one had come to any of us about Marie's nightmares, so we probably would have slept through the night anyway.

It didn't stop me from wishing I'd been able to be there. Even if all I could have done was offer her my shoulder, that was better than nothing.

“How bad were they?”

Romani frowned and covered his hesitation by taking another sip of his coffee. “About as bad as we were expecting them to be. Even if her body is back in Chaldea, her mind keeps getting dragged back to Fuyuki while she sleeps. Half the times she woke up last night had her sobbing about Lev and how he could do what he did.”

He sighed and went on, “I can't say I blame her for that. I know I didn't tell you guys this, but just between you and me? I had my own fair share of nightmares about that day for the first couple of weeks afterwards.”

I didn't say anything to that. What could I say? That I'd become so inured to that sort of thing that I'd slept like a baby afterwards? Any nightmares I'd had after Fuyuki had been almost entirely about Marie and failing to save her. Lev hadn't featured anywhere near as much, just because we'd never been particularly close. Polite and cordial to each other, but too distant for it to sting the way it did for Romani and Marie.

Romani would probably have some comment about how that wasn't healthy. Thinking about my sessions with Doctor Yamada, he was probably even right. There just wasn't anything I was willing to do about it now.

"Is there anything else we can do for her? Until Da Vinci makes the dreamcatcher, that is."

Romani shrugged helplessly. "I'd like to say be there and be supportive," he said, "but Director Animosphere isn't the kind to accept sympathy like that. She's too determined to do everything for herself."

It was nothing I hadn't already expected, but some part of me, however small, had been hoping he would give me a better answer than that.

I went back to my food. The waffles didn't taste quite so good anymore, coming off of the news that had just been dropped into my lap, but that was no reason to let them go to waste just so I could be hungrier than usual a few hours from now.

"At least everyone else seems to have slept well last night," Romani said tiredly. "I half expected either you or the twins to visit Director Animosphere in the middle of the night. You especially, given how anxious you were about getting her back before."

I regarded him for a moment, using chewing my food as cover for my thoughts. Aífe probably wouldn't appreciate it very much if I started airing her dirty laundry, even if it *was* to Romani, but the fact that we *had* been pulled into her dream meant that we *could* be pulled into our Servants' dreams, and that was probably something he needed to know, at least until Marie was back in the Director's chair.

After taking a second to swallow, I told him, "We got pulled into Aífe's dream last night."

He blinked, bemused. "Pulled into her dream? You mean the three of you?"

"It started off normal enough," I said. "Standard dream stuff. About halfway through, I suddenly found myself in Ireland, or maybe Scotland, watching a battle between Aífe's army and her sister's..."

In the interest of maintaining at least *some* of Aífe's privacy, I didn't go into too much detail about the trials she faced or who they pitted her against. Instead, I focused on the way the dream felt, the lucidity we all had during it, and the fact that even so, things were still dreamlike enough that things like time, distance, and geography could be malleable enough to change when we weren't paying attention.

The one thing I *had* to tell him was the thing that Aífe had never come out and told *us*, but which had been made obvious to me by the way she talked to Scáthach at the end of the fight. Namely, the fact that the whole thing had supposedly been set up by Scáthach herself, presumably from the distant Land of Shadows where, if Aífe was right, she still lived, training and fighting by herself every day.

By the time I finished, his brow had furrowed and a pensive look was on his face.

“That’s...” He didn’t seem to know what to say. “I want to say that should be impossible, but those two regularly did things that flew in the face of that. You’re sure that the person she fought was the real Scáthach?”

“No,” I admitted, because it still seemed far-fetched even to me, “but Aífe seemed sure, and the way she talked, it sounded like she was certain it was something Scáthach could do.”

Romani sighed, rubbing at his eyes with the fingertips of one hand. “There’s no precedent for that,” he told me bluntly, which wasn’t anything I didn’t already know. “The dream cycle is an established thing, but that’s just supposed to be seeing a Servant’s memories of their past, not...”

He gestured jerkily, as though to encompass the entirety of it. I understood the feeling.

“That’s why I’m telling you,” I said. “If it happened once, it can happen again. Next time, it might not be a sister reaching out across time and space to give her sister some closure, it might be one of Solomon’s Demon Gods trying to eat us.”

Romani held up a finger. “That part, I’m less sure about. After all, it stands to reason that if they could do that, they would have already done it, wouldn’t they?”

That...was actually a pretty good point. If Flauros could have crushed us in our sleep by reaching into our dreams and breaking our minds, why did he go through that whole thing in Septem? For that matter, if it was that easy for them to affect us, then why were we even still alive?

“You think we’re...protected, somehow? That’s the reason why he had to set bombs instead of sabotaging us some other way?”

Romani shrugged. “Da Vinci could give you a whole lot more details, I’m sure,” he said. “But it makes more sense than the idea that they’re just ignoring us, even after we foiled their plans *twice*. Don’t you think?”

He might be onto something. I wasn’t sure I was willing to extend it to the idea that we were virtually untouchable in Chaldea — last night disproved that idea on its face — but every Thinker I’d ever encountered had blind spots, from Lisa to Dinah to Alexandria herself. Even Cauldron’s boogieman with her “I win” power had things that she couldn’t use it on, for one reason or another.

It stood to reason that idea followed here, too.

“Maybe.”

“Still,” he went on. “It *is* strange and a little worrying. I’ll have to talk to Da Vinci and see if there’s anything we can do about it.”

Beep-beep! my communicator chimed, and when I checked it, there was a message from Da Vinci, asking me to meet her down in her workshop.

“Speaking of Da Vinci...”

Romani blinked. “That’s her? She must be pretty busy if she isn’t coming up here to get you herself.”

“She wants me to meet her down in her workshop.”

“Oh.” He took another sip of his coffee. “Yeah, she mentioned something about solutions to the Director’s sleep problem after she woke up screaming for the third time. I’m not sure what she needs you for, though.”

My heart skipped a beat. Was she taking me up on my idea from earlier? Could she really have made that spider puppet that quickly?

Who was I kidding? This was Da Vinci. She’d made Marie a replacement body in a week.

“I might have an idea.”

I finished off my breakfast with a little more speed than necessary, gulped down my orange juice, then took my empty plate and tray back up to Emiya, who accepted it back wordlessly. He had on another one of those silly novelty aprons, the kind with witty or playful phrases on the front. This one was an ordinary “Kiss the Cook.”

Naturally, I didn’t obey it. The only thing he got from me was a small, brief smile, a raised eyebrow, and an empty tray. His cooking was good, but it wasn’t *that* good.

With that done, I headed towards the cafeteria exit, because I didn’t want to waste any time.

“Have a good day!” Romani called after me, toasting me with the cheap, paper cup he was drinking out of.

“Go take a nap!” I threw back at him.

The cafeteria door closed behind me before he could offer a rebuttal, and I started off towards Da Vinci’s workshop, forcing myself to take the trip at a walking pace. There was no need to rush, because even if I was right, getting there a few minutes faster wouldn’t change much about how quickly Da Vinci could bring her idea to life.

On the way there, I ran into someone — Mash, coming from the direction of the dorm rooms, where Ritsuka and Rika looked to still be asleep.

“Oh!” she said, surprised. “Good morning, Miss Taylor!”

“Fouu,” the little gremlin on her shoulder greeted me sourly.

“Good morning, Mash,” I replied, ignoring Fou entirely. “The twins still asleep?”

She sighed. “Yes, they are. Senpai said something about having a day off, and Senpai said that she was catching up on her beauty sleep. I told them that Aífe would be harder on them if they tried to skip their morning workout, but Senpai said that Aífe was the one who gave them the day off, even though I haven’t seen Aífe all morning.”

Senpai and Senpai — that was going to get very confusing, if she wasn’t careful.

“They’re not lying,” I told her. “We got sucked into Aífe’s dream last night and helped her with some things, so Aífe gave them the morning off today.”

Mash blinked. “Oh.” Then what I’d said caught up with her, and she panicked. “W-wait, you got sucked into Aífe’s dream? Without me? W-what do you mean, Miss Taylor?”

My lips pursed. As much as I liked Mash, I *was* in the middle of something when she and I found each other, and I’d already taken the time to finish eating before I left the cafeteria. I wasn’t in a rush, but I didn’t want to make Da Vinci wait any longer than I had to, not if it was about what I thought it was, so I couldn’t just stand around in the hallway to sate Mash’s curiosity.

“I was on my way to Da Vinci’s workshop, she needed me for something,” I told Mash. “We can walk and talk.”

“Oh,” Mash said. “I’ll come along, then!”

She fell into step beside me as I started walking again, and I did my best to ignore the itching sensation of Fou’s gaze on my face and his presence beside me while I explained the situation from the previous night to Mash. As I had with Romani, I edited out a lot of the details for the sake of Aífe’s privacy, but I made sure to convey the important points. Like the fact that Aífe was grateful enough afterwards to give the twins the morning off.

“I see,” Mash said quietly once I’d finished. “So even someone who seems so strong like Queen Aífe...can have things that weigh her down.” She smiled. “I’m glad. That Senpai and Senpai could help someone else the same way they did me.”

“The way they helped you?” I asked.

I hadn’t heard about this part before. When had the twins done that?

Mash blinked, surprised. “I didn’t tell you, Miss Taylor?”

“Not that I remember.”

“Senpai... They came looking for me in the Rayshift Chamber, after the bombs went off.” She ducked her head, smiling happily, like it was a memory she cherished. “The whole room was on fire, and I was pinned beneath a pillar. It must have weighed several tons, and it probably severed my spinal cord, because I couldn’t feel my legs. If the emergency Rayshift hadn’t happened...I think I would have bled out in another minute or two.”

I looked at her askance. It wasn’t like I hadn’t met people who took joy in things even stranger and more depraved — the entire Slaughterhouse Nine came to mind, like Manton, who enjoyed *eating people* with his Siberian — but that still didn’t sound like something you were supposed to be happy about.

“They found me there,” Mash went on, “and they tried to lift that pillar off of me, even though it was way too big and way too heavy for ordinary humans. And when the bulkhead doors sealed, they sat with me and held my hands. Even though they could have escaped before that and saved themselves, they stayed with me and gave me comfort.”

They...really did that? Up until now, I'd been under the impression that the twins had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time — or, perhaps in these circumstances, the right place at the right time. Just bystanders who got swept along when things went to shit.

Except apparently, they weren't. They might not have deliberately stayed around to become Masters, and they might not have had much idea of what they were getting themselves into, but it said something about them, something good, that the whole reason they were even there in Fuyuki was because they both decided to be good people, even if it was going to cost them their lives.

I really had underestimated them, it seemed. Even if they were green as grass in Spring, they had something that a lot of heroes in my own career had been lacking: a genuine desire to do good.

“They really did that, huh...”

“Mm!” Mash nodded. “That’s why... When we were Rayshifted to Fuyuki, I made them my Masters. I couldn’t do anything else for the people who did so much for me.”

There was a pause, and her face flushed red. “N-not that I don’t think you’d make a great Master, Miss Taylor!” she rushed to add. “I-it’s only that... I-I didn’t realize you were there, too! I-if I’d known that you also were still in the Rayshift Chamber with us when we were sent to Fuyuki —”

“It’s okay, Mash,” I said, offering her a smile. “I’m not offended or anything. I get it. Remember what I told the twins after Fuyuki? The first time, it’s all just a matter of luck. The right place at the right time to do the right thing. That time, it was them.”

“Foouu,” the little gremlin murmured doubtfully. I ignored him.

“I see. Thank you, Miss Taylor.” Mash sighed. “I’m glad, though. In the end, you summoned a Servant that works so well with you, too. Even if it wasn’t who you were hoping for, Arash is a real hero.”

I tried not to let my smile fall too far. He really was. In some ways, I think he was better than I deserved. In others, I think he was exactly the sort of Servant I deserved. A Heroic Spirit who did everything right the first time, even if it cost him his life.

Was it karma that brought him to me?

“Well, we found Siegfried eventually, too,” I said, playing it off. “So I did wind up getting the Heroic Spirit I was looking for, in the end.”

“That’s true, isn’t it?” Mash mused. She hummed. “And then we found Bradamante, and now Queen Aífe and Lord El-Melloi II... I-it can’t make up for all of the people who died, but... Chaldea really is growing, isn’t it?”

Not to mention Shakespeare and Emiya, although the former had been holed up in the room he claimed for himself almost since the moment he’d been summoned. A part of me wondered what he was getting up to in there. Another part of me worried about finding out.

And the most important thing, of course...

“And now we got Director Animosphere back.”

Mash smiled. “Yeah!”

When we reached Da Vinci’s workshop, Mash turned to me, gave a short bow, and said, “Thank you for telling me about the dream with Queen Aífe, Miss Taylor. I’m going to see if I can get Senpai and Senpai out of bed again. Good luck with Miss Da Vinci!”

“No problem, Mash.”

Then, she left. Thankfully, the little gremlin decided to go with her, so that persistent itch of something crawling up and down my spine left, too.

The door to Da Vinci’s workshop swooshed open. “Hello, hello!” she greeted me as I stepped inside. “Good morning, Taylor!”

“Good morning, Da Vinci,” I replied in kind. “You said you needed me for something?”

“Yes, yes! Come here!”

She waved me over with one hand, smiling broadly, and after a brief moment of hesitation, I stepped further in and towards the project she was currently working on at her desk. Table? Whichever it counted as.

I recognized the rounded hoop shape immediately.

“That’s —”

A dreamcatcher.

“Yes, that’s right,” said Da Vinci. She gestured down at the simple wooden loop, bound together at the top by a piece of twine. I didn’t imagine she was going to keep it that way. “The idea of using a dreamcatcher to aid our illustrious Director Animosphere was not a bad one, it just presents us with a few difficulties in seeing it through.”

I looked around, scanning the antiquated, Renaissance Era workshop, but there was no sign of the spider puppet that she’d mentioned building for me. I *did* spy a diagram of a spider sketched onto what looked like thin parchment, with special attention paid to the spinnerets.

I also saw a stretch of black silk sitting out nearby that sketch. A very familiar bolt of black silk that looked like it had been carefully sheared away from a larger piece of fabric.

“Is that...?”

From my old costume?

Da Vinci looked where I was looking, then turned back to me with a smile. “I hope you don’t mind. I would have needed a sample to get the silk composition correct to begin with, but I also thought

that it would be much more efficient and much less time consuming to simply use some silk that was already woven by a real spider.”

I...wasn't quite sure how to feel about that. Things had been moving so fast at the time that I couldn't remember whether I'd explicitly given her permission to cannibalize my costume to make the dreamcatcher or the silk from the spider puppet, but even if I hadn't... The costume was all but useless to me, and it was from a part of my life I was trying to move past, so I would have given her permission if she asked.

“Will it be enough?”

Given the kind of shape it was in and the shape of the bolt of silk she had there, she must have pulled it either from the shawl or the skirt. Definitely not the mask, though, because it didn't have any holes cut into it for my lenses.

“Oh, more than enough,” said Da Vinci, unconcerned. “The hard part, frankly, will be separating out the individual threads so I can make use of them, but even that is more a matter of tedium than effort. I won't even need all of what I have here, if I'm being honest with you.”

“What about the rest of the costume?”

She looked at me dubiously. “Well, if you want it back, I don't strictly need it for anything, but I can't imagine what use you might have for it. Even if I took the time to bring it up to spec to match your current standard issue Mystic Code, it's a bit too...conspicuous to use during Rayshifts.”

Of course it was, I thought, a little annoyed. I wasn't stupid. The only place that costume belonged was on Earth Bet, or maybe shoved into my closet, like an old jacket I couldn't wear anymore but held onto for sentimental value.

“That's not what I'm saying,” I told her. “I meant that it might be better to use it for something else. Like putting a silk underlayer into the Chaldean uniforms. It might not help that much against Servants, but that doesn't mean it would be *useless*.”

Da Vinci raised a finger, opened her mouth, closed it, and then said, “That might actually be something worth doing. I'll have to look into it.” She shook her head. “Regardless, that's not the reason I called you down here. Taylor, I need your assistance with putting this dreamcatcher together.”

I looked at her skeptically. “You do?”

The great genius, Leonardo da Vinci, needed *my* help building something so simple?

Da Vinci nodded and waved me over again. “Come closer,” she said.

Warily, I stepped closer to her desk, and she kept on smiling.

“Now,” she twirled her finger, “turn around for me, please.”

Still leery of what she had planned, I did as she asked and turned around, putting my back to her. A moment later, her hand was in my hair, combing through it calmly, and with a jolt, I realized what she was about to do.

Oh. I know I offered, but even so, something squirmed uncomfortably in my gut.

“And now, if you would,” said Da Vinci, “I would like you to turn on your magic circuits and cycle mana through them, please.”

I took a deep breath, and in my mind’s eye, I pictured a thread of spider’s silk pulled taut, fraying in the middle, and snapping. My magic circuits spun up, and I carefully took just enough magical energy to fill each and every one of them and began flowing it through, looping back around like a turbine turning.

“Yes,” said Da Vinci. “Just like that. Hold it for me for a moment.”

My heart thudded in my chest, but I did as she said, closing my eyes. It made the sound of the scissors snipping away seem all the louder as she cut once, twice, three times, cutting my hair loose with each one.

On the tenth snip, she suddenly declared, “All done! You can stop cycling mana now.”

My eyes shot back open, and I whirled back around to her smiling face as she held out ten individual strands of hair from her fingers, and only ten. That was it. Just ten hairs. The rest was completely untouched.

I lost more than that to my hairbrush every week.

“What?”

“Did you expect me to take it all?” Da Vinci shook her head. “My plan only needs ten strands of your hair — to weave together with ten strands of silk, you see. It’s a bit of mixing and matching mythologies and systems of magecraft, but in numerology, ten is the number of completion, you see, and cycles. Theoretically, it should help strengthen the dreamcatcher’s purpose.”

“Theoretically?”

I’d heard that term and its synonyms plenty of times throughout my career, and things had often worked out in some form or fashion in spite of them, but that didn’t mean I liked to hear it any more than I had before.

“Mixing and matching systems of magecraft always carries some risk of failure,” said Da Vinci. “In this case, there isn’t anything that says these particular forms are incompatible, so even if I can’t offer you a guarantee, I can at least say that there’s no reason why it shouldn’t work.”

I still wasn’t particularly happy about that, but this was Da Vinci, after all. She wasn’t perfect, but she’d already performed a miracle and brought Marie back to life, so I could give her a bit of slack and trust her at least this far.

“How long will it take you to finish that?”

She laughed and waved it off. “Oh, come now, Taylor! This is me you’re talking to, after all! If a child at a summer camp could make one in an afternoon, why ever should it take me any longer than that for me to make one myself?”

That...was actually a fairly good point. I’d made one myself in summer camp, too, and it really hadn’t been that hard or taken longer than an hour or two while we listened to the camp counselors talk us through doing it.

“So you’ll have it done for tonight, then.”

“Of course!” she said brightly. “Why, our dear Director Animosphere will be sleeping like a baby tonight, just you wait!”

I felt a bit of weight lift itself off of my shoulders. “Thank you, Da Vinci.”

“It’s no problem.” She smiled slyly. “Speaking of Director Animosphere, I’m sure she’s feeling quite lonely right now, so why don’t you go and see her? She should still be in the infirmary — doctor’s orders, you understand.”

So that it was easier to keep an eye on her. Yeah, I understood that completely. Marie probably didn’t appreciate it — scratch that, I *knew* she didn’t appreciate it — but her safety was more important to me than her comfort. I wasn’t willing to risk losing her right after we got her back.

“I’ll go and do that, then,” I said, turning to leave.

“Have a good day, Taylor!” Da Vinci chirped at my back. I lifted a hand and waved, and then I left.

The infirmary, fortunately, wasn’t on the complete other side of the facility, even if it wasn’t exactly right next to Da Vinci’s workshop either, so it didn’t take me all that long to make the trip. It was only a few minutes later that I was walking up to it, and the door whooshed open with a hydraulic whir.

Marie, from the other end of the infirmary, looked up from the stack of papers she was going through and over towards me. Her eyes widened, surprised and a little relieved.

“Hebert!”

I couldn’t stop myself from smiling a little. “Good morning, Director.”