

Chapter XXIX: The Fourth Wall

I was never going to take a proper bed for granted again.

The nap I had gotten after my talk with Da Vinci and Romani had been good, and the feast Emiya had prepared afterwards was strange but heavenly, but a full night of good sleep on a comfortable bed was something I hadn't realized I'd been missing out on quite as badly as it turned out I was. The day after we returned from Orléans, I woke up feeling better rested and in a better mood than I had the entirety of the month we'd spent in France.

Could Emiya project a tent to match those air mattresses, I wondered. If so, it might be worth it to skip out on keeping him here in reserve just so we could sleep in comfort while we were on our missions.

Unless that meant he couldn't cook any of his gourmet meals for us. That was a hard decision, whether a good night's sleep or a warm, tasty, satisfying meal was more important, and even I wasn't sure which side of it I would come down on, if I had to choose.

Rolling out of bed was easier and far more painless than it had been in what felt like forever, and the twinges in my shoulders and neck were much less noticeable as I changed out of my pajamas and into my day wear. Casual stuff I could workout in, because I was definitely going to be hitting the exercise room at some point today, make sure to get in my daily run, even if it *was* on a treadmill.

The clock read 9:37 a.m., later than I usually got up, so I tied my hair back into a loose tail and left my room for the cafeteria.

There were maybe three people I saw on my way there, but the twins weren't among them — a mystery quickly solved when I got close to the cafeteria itself, because a familiar female voice was loudly telling a story to what must have been Ritsuka, Rika, and Mash.

“And then,” Bradamante said excitedly, gesturing with her empty hands; sure enough, the twins and Mash were sitting at the table she was standing in front of, already eating, “and then, I charged forward with my lance, and he tried to stop me, but I was too fast —”

I tuned her out as she continued the retelling of some adventure she'd gone on while she was alive. Something to do with some kind of wizard, it sounded like, but the twins found the whole thing more enthralling than I did. It wasn't quite the same listening to someone's “war stories” when you had quite a few under your belt, too. It probably wouldn't be long before the twins were less impressed, too, since we still had another six Singularities to deal with.

Emiya was behind the counter when I made it up to the food line, and he smirked at me as I stepped closer.

“Good morning, Sleeping Beauty,” he said. “Get enough sleep, last night?”

“More than you did, I bet,” I replied dryly.

“Heh.”

He started piling food onto a plate for me. It all looked absolutely delicious.

“I’ve been wondering about that, actually,” I went on. “Servants aren’t supposed to need sleep, but does it affect you at all to go without? I’ve known a few people with conditions that prevent them from needing to sleep, and even if they didn’t *need* it, it always helped if they got a few hours of shut-eye every once in a while.”

I hadn’t known *many* Noctis capes, but the handful I’d met and asked about it had said that it felt good to sleep every once in a while, even if it wasn’t necessary. Refreshing. Helped them put their thoughts in order and reorient themselves.

“It’s something like that for us, too,” he answered. “Strictly speaking, Servants can go without sleep indefinitely without any drop in performance, so the act of sleeping itself becomes a kind of luxury. A novel activity to indulge in, when there’s nothing going on and you don’t have to worry about being attacked in the middle of the night. Unless your Master is a complete novice with no idea how to supply you with magical energy, that is. Then, sleep becomes a means of conserving mana.”

That...sounded like there was a story there. One that he probably wouldn’t tell me if I asked.

“Of course,” he continued, “here at Chaldea, there isn’t much to do in our off time. Since the simulator still isn’t fully repaired, the only thing for us Servants to do while you Masters are sleeping is to sleep ourselves. That is, if we haven’t been roped into other things, like cooking.”

A snort huffed out of my nostrils. “If you quit, Rika will mutiny.”

He shrugged and shook his head, like, ‘what can you do?’

“I think she might actually order me with a Command Spell if I tried to stop,” Emiya said, but his voice was filled with humor, not bitterness. “It seems like a spectacular waste of such a precious resource, so I guess I’ll just have to content myself with my lot in life and continue to be Chaldea’s chef.”

“You sound very broken up about it.”

“Somehow,” he said wryly, “I’ll try and muddle through.” He added a dollop of butter atop my waffles, set a few slices of strawberries on the very top, and then placed a glass of orange juice in the corner of my tray. “All ready. Enjoy your breakfast, Taylor.”

Oh, I definitely would. No need to inflate his head any further, though, so I left him with a simple, “Thanks.”

With my tray loaded up, I made my way towards one of the tables and sat down to eat. A dozen feet away, Bradamante continued regaling the twins and Mash with the story of her adventures. Almost against my will, I found myself smiling a little as I turned to my food and picked up my silverware.

I’d barely started cutting with my knife before Arash appeared opposite me, shimmering into existence in the chair across from me with a smile. He nodded his head towards the twins.

“Not going to sit with the others, Master?”

“I’m not going to interrupt story time.”

My first bite brought a burst of sweet and salty goodness, and in the privacy of my own head, I had to admit again that Emiya really was an excellent chef. Not what you expected when you summoned the spirit of a deceased hero to do battle against the enemies of mankind, but then you never could predict what sort of everyday skills they must have picked up while they were alive, could you?

Did Arash or Siegfried have anything like that? Somehow, I had trouble imagining either of them in a Hawaiian shirt with a fishing rod or dressed in shorts and a tank top in front of a grill. Maybe hunting — wasn't that how Siegfried was supposed to have died? While sipping at a stream on a hunting trip?

Well, with his archery skills, no need to wonder if Arash was any good at it.

"I'm not sure they'd notice if you did," Arash said, sliding a glance over at the other table. "Bradamante looks like she has them pretty deeply enthralled."

I shrugged and took a sip of my orange juice. "War stories seem more impressive when you don't have any of your own. They'll be trading back and forth soon enough."

"Spoken as someone who has a few herself?" Arash turned back to me, easygoing smile still in place. Guileless. But there was no way that was an entirely innocent question, not with eyes as sharp as his were.

It was easy to forget, sometimes, what with that boyish charm and open face, but Arash was sharp and calculating. It was part of being an archer and an Archer, I had to imagine.

"Are you asking me to share a few?" I replied with affected calm.

He shrugged and leaned back in his chair. "I suppose I wanted to get to know my Master a bit better, now that we're not rushing about to save France. But considering that it was me you summoned, I think I might have a better grasp on your character than you're honestly comfortable with."

He tilted his head back over at the others.

"They're the ones who probably need to hear that sort of thing more," he went on. "Orléans was tough on them. It was tough on you, too, but you're used to it, so they didn't see that so much. It might help them to know that you aren't made of stone."

I ate slowly to cover up my silence. Suddenly, the food wasn't quite as good as before, and the sour of the strawberries stood out more on my tongue.

It wasn't like he was wrong, exactly. If Doctor Yamada was here, she might even say something similar, tell me about how healthy it was to open up with people and let them in. Intellectually, I knew that I couldn't remain a distant figure of experience and authority with the twins forever. Eventually, one way or another, they'd wind up inside and learning more about me than I probably wanted.

But...

"That might be one of the ways in which you and I are very different, Arash," I told him. "I'm not the sharing type. I don't pour my heart out."

And in my head, I knew that was a remnant of the Trio and everything that had shaped me for much of my teenage years, even if I'd moved past those three long before Scion ever became a problem. The scars from that time of my life had made me guarded, jaded, and reticent. Slow to trust. When I connected, I formed strong bonds quickly. But outside a select few, I didn't connect easily.

Recognizing all of that about myself didn't make it easier to change what I did about it.

"I wouldn't know where to start, anyway," I went on, but even I knew the excuse for what it was. I slid a glance the twins' way. Rika's face was open and excited in a way that it hadn't really been for all of France. "I'm not sure they'd believe half of the shit I waded through before my sixteenth birthday."

"I heard something about how you killed a dragon? Besides the wyvern in France," he added. "That might be a good one to start with."

I snorted. "Beat. *Beat* a dragon. I'm not sure where I would be now if I killed him."

Ignoring all of the other sorts of trouble it would have brought me, would I even have made it as far through Gold Morning without him? Lung burning off my mutilated arm was the only thing that let me focus on anything aside from the pain of the original wound. If that pain had instead gotten the better of me, would I even have been coherent enough to start formulating the plan that eventually led to Scion's death? Or would I have bled out eventually from my mangled arm?

Ironically, Lung had probably saved my life. Funny how that worked, when you considered where he and I started.

"That might be a good place to start," said Arash.

"I'd have to explain a whole lot of backstory, first," I told him. "Why he was there, why I was there, why I attacked him, how I attacked him, how I could attack him in the first place..."

It was a lot. It would mean going over Scion appearing in the 80s, powers showing up, heroes and villains in costume, Brockton Bay, the situation with the gangs... There was so much information that I had taken for granted my whole life that you needed to know just for it to make sense that I even met Lung, let alone why I fought him.

Da Vinci and Romani had just needed a bit of context for my powers. Telling the twins about my *life*? You could fit it all into a novel.

"You can't hide it all from them forever, Master," said Arash. There was no accusation or heat in his words, just blunt truth. "Eventually, they won't take 'later' for an answer."

A heavy sigh heaved out of my mouth. "I know."

I looked over at the twins' table again. Bradamante had moved onto another story, this one apparently about her lover and some adventure she'd gone on to chase after him. I thought of Brian, then, even though time and distance had given me enough perspective to realize that whatever we'd had together probably hadn't been remotely healthy for either one of us.

And he was also probably dead. Even as Khepri, I'd never had the courage to check and make sure.

“Not today,” I decided, although I recognized the retreat for what it was. “Let them listen to Bradamante, for now. Most of my stories don’t have a happy ending.”

With my food finished, I stood from my chair and turned to take my tray back to Emiya so he could wash it. Behind me, I heard Arash’s low, rueful chuckle.

“Most other heroes don’t either, Master.”

I deliberately didn’t think about the implications in that statement. I didn’t *want* to think about what he was trying to imply, because I was a lot of things, but I wasn’t sure ‘hero’ was among them.

I left my tray and plate with Emiya, and then quietly and discreetly left the cafeteria, skirting around the twins’ table and Bradamante. I could feel Arash’s eyes on me the whole way, and it felt like he was judging me for my cowardice.

One day, the twins would find out more about my past. It was inevitable. It wasn’t like I was going out of my way to be deliberately mysterious or secretive, after all, and I’d already dropped a number of tidbits and slices here and there. It was just that there was just too much to unpack and there were plenty of parts I didn’t want to relive if I didn’t have to.

I didn’t think that was unfair of me.

Exercising on a full stomach wasn’t a good idea, so I went back to my room and tried to do a little research on the era we were going to be dropped into when the time came to visit Rome. I wasn’t sure how much use it would be, though. At the end of the day, my admittedly sparse knowledge of the politics of the Hundred Years War hadn’t been particularly relevant in the last Singularity, and without any idea what the next one was going to look like, it was hard to know what was going to be useful and what would wind up utter junk.

It wasn’t like a month was enough time to become an expert on the Roman Empire, either.

About an hour after I sat down, my communicator chimed with a message from Romani asking me to meet him in the Command Room for a debriefing about the French Singularity, so I saved my place and left to go meet up with him. The halls still felt unbearably empty, vacant of the life that I had taken for granted for two years, and I saw maybe one person on my way, an exhausted technician who looked asleep on her feet.

Looked like everyone was still pulling multiple shifts to try and keep everything running at least smoothly enough that we didn’t crash and burn. I still felt a little uneasy about the fact that I wasn’t one of them.

Romani and the twins were already waiting for me by the time I arrived, with Mash standing patiently next to Ritsuka. Romani looked up from whatever he was working on as I entered and greeted me with a smile.

“Oh, Taylor, you’re here,” he said. “Good. Gimme a second, I need to finish up real quick...”

He turned back to his work and his fingers danced over the touch screen as he fiddled with whatever it was he’d been in the middle of. The twins stood awkwardly, and I shifted to one foot, crossing my arms over my chest.

A few minutes of long silence later, he tapped one more thing and then turned his attention back to us.

“Right,” said Romani, holding up his tablet, “so let’s get a quick overview of the events that went down, now that everyone has had a chance to rest and recover at least a little. This is really more of a formality than anything,” he added. “I know it doesn’t feel that important now, but if we get everything back to normal, then the Mage’s Association and the UN are going to be breathing down our necks, so it’s better to make sure the paperwork is all in order. Things are less messy that way.”

Neither of the twins looked particularly happy about that, and I wasn’t thrilled, either, but crossing t’s and dotting i’s had become a familiar routine in the Wards. Especially being in the sort of position I was in, having all the paperwork in order had saved me a lot of hassle in the long run.

Of course, then Scion had gone batshit, and paperwork hadn’t been quite so important, so in the longest run, maybe it had all been pointless. End of the world tended to uproot systems and organizations like that.

“Where do we start, Doctor Roman?” Mash asked.

“From the beginning, unfortunately,” said Romani, sounding less than thrilled. “I’ll just make it easier and summarize everything, okay? All you guys need to do is answer the questions and clarify a few things. Sound good?”

My lips pursed and I sighed. “I’ll write up my own official report later, too.”

“You really don’t have to,” he tried to tell me.

“I think I really should,” I countered. “The twins and Mash should probably learn to write up after action reports, too. They’re going to need it if there’s an inquiry once this is all over and we have to stand before a tribunal or something.”

“Tribunal?” Ritsuka squeaked, his voice an octave higher than usual.

I cocked an eyebrow in his direction. “You didn’t think the world could end, all of humanity could get erased, then when they came back, none of them would have any questions, did you?”

“I...hadn’t really thought about it,” he answered tightly.

“We have Servants,” Rika said mulishly, “they can direct their questions to Emiya’s bow.”

“Somehow, I don’t think they’ll like that kind of answer, Rika,” Romani said, laughing awkwardly.

“Tough cookies for them.”

“We’ll put that down as a method of last resort,” Da Vinci interjected diplomatically. I hadn’t even noticed her come in. “In the meantime, keeping all of the paperwork in order can only help, so for now, let’s just get this out of the way, shall we?”

Ritsuka grimaced and Rika didn’t look any happier about it, but neither of them objected.

“Okay,” said Romani, some of the tension leaving his shoulders, “let’s kick off from the beginning. After the Rayshift, your team arrived at a midway point between Vaucouleurs and Domrémy...”

Romani summarized the entirety of our trek through the French countryside and all the events therein: heading to Vaucouleurs, fighting the wyvern there, meeting Jeanne as a stray Servant, the journey to La Charité, fighting Jeanne Alter's retinue, then going to Lyon to find Siegfried, fighting Saint Martha and Phantom, to Thiers in search of allies, splitting up, the twins and Mash in Périgueux.

He skimmed most of it, hitting the highlights and focusing on them instead of the minutiae. The dual attacks on Périgueux and Thiers, Fafnir and Dracul, the Servants at Périgueux, the retreat back to Thiers, and then the final assault on Orléans. Fafnir's defeat, the wyverns going out of control, Gilles de Rais, the fight with Jeanne Alter, and then the revelation that Jeanne Alter had been a manifestation around the Grail the entire time.

It sounded so succinct and compacted that I almost couldn't believe it had taken us about a month to do it all.

We answered when he asked for clarification for the sake of the record, but mostly we were just giving him yes or no answers and didn't need to elaborate much further. The only times we had to explain anything was when we had to detail the logic behind some of the decisions we made.

"Yeah, it all checks out. Your stories match our records," Romani said, but contrary to his words, he didn't look satisfied.

"Is something wrong, Doctor Roman?" Mash asked.

"You look like you're sucking on a lemon, Doc," Rika added.

Romani's hand made an aborted reach for his mouth, as though to check that his lips were indeed pulled into a grimace, and he shook his head.

"It's a discrepancy I noticed," he admitted. "Or, well, more like, there's something I was expecting that wound up not being there, and you've just confirmed our sensors didn't misread it."

"Misread what?" I asked.

He glanced around at our group. Slowly, he said, "You guys didn't notice Lev Lainur anywhere, did you?"

The four of us shared a look, and Mash's brow furrowed the way mine must have been. Slowly, Ritsuka shook his head. "I don't remember seeing Professor Lev anywhere, Doctor Roman."

"He wasn't there when we retrieved the Grail, either," Mash mumbled, sounding troubled.

He wasn't, was he? He'd shown up in Fuyuki once the battle was over and gloated, but he didn't even pop up to laugh at us struggling the entire time we were in France. After the way he'd talked in Fuyuki, how personal he'd made the whole thing seem to him, that *was* a little strange, wasn't it?

Romani shook his head. "I might just be reading too much into it. If he didn't show up in France, it's probably because he's in one of the other Singularities."

"Should we be worried?" I asked.

Romani shrugged helplessly. “It might be nothing,” he admitted. “If Lev is powerful enough to come and go from those Singularities as he pleases, then there’s no way he’s hiding from us or anything like that. On the other hand, that might mean that some of the Singularities are less important than the others, so he’s watching over one of the more important ones instead of worrying about France.”

That...was a disturbingly likely possibility.

If I had a plan like theirs, whatever the end goal was, and it required a handful of lynchpins in order to work out, then I would let my enemies waste their time and efforts on the less important, less essential ones and spend all of *my* time and effort on reinforcing the ones that absolutely couldn’t fail. Especially if my plan didn’t require *all* of my lynchpins to work, just a couple of the essential ones, and my enemies didn’t have any choice other than to dismantle all of them.

“Of course, it might just be a matter of temperament,” Romani added. “It could be that he’s staying in the Singularity that suits his tastes the best. There’s no way to be certain until we see him again.”

I shared another look with the others. None of us disagreed — we *would* be seeing Lev Lainur again. He wasn’t getting away next time.

The part I wasn’t sure about was what that meant to the other three.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it,” I said.

“Or burn it down,” Rika muttered.

“Well, that’s all we really needed to go over today,” said Romani, and then something dawned over his face. “Oh! Right, I almost forgot! We managed to get the second Grail provisionally hooked up to our power grid last night. Ritsuka, it doesn’t have to be right now, but we were hoping we could have you do a summoning next. You’re the only one who hasn’t actually performed one and picked up a new contract.”

“It’s fine, Doctor Roman,” said Ritsuka with a shake of his head and a smile that wasn’t wholly genuine. “We might as well get it over with, right? I’m okay with doing it right away.”

Romani’s brow furrowed. I doubt he was any more fooled by that bravado than I was. “If you’re sure...”

Ritsuka fidgeted a little. “There’s no reason to put it off, right?”

“Don’t worry so much, Onii-chan,” Rika said, grinning at him as she dug an elbow into his ribs. “I already called the awesomest Servant ever, so it’s okay if yours is a total dud.”

The glare he sent her way spoke volumes about how funny he thought that was, in big, capital letters.

Romani cleared his throat pointedly to cut off any argument that might have started. “In that case, I guess our next stop is the summoning chamber, isn’t it?”

Ritsuka met Romani’s gaze with firm determination. “Yes.”

“In that case, I’ll go fetch Mister Meunier, shall I?” said Da Vinci.

“Please do,” Romani said gratefully. “Taylor, do you think you could call Arash and Siegfried? I don’t expect we’ll actually have any trouble, but just in case Ritsuka summons a Berserker, I’d really like the extra backup.”

I cast my attention down the line of my bonds with Arash and Siegfried. *Arash, Siegfried*, I told them, *we’re going to attempt another summoning. Romani wants backup in case whoever comes through decides to get unruly.*

On my way, Arash replied at the same time as Siegfried’s simple, *I’ll be there.*

“Done,” I said.

Romani nodded. “Well,” he sighed, “no time like the present, right?”

“Lead on, Doc,” Rika said. “You’re in charge.”

Romani chuckled a little. “Yeah, I guess I am, huh? It’s a miracle the coffee machine still works with me running this thing.” He cleared his throat. “Well, let’s get going, then.”

We all fell into step behind Romani as we made the trek to the summoning chamber. Ritsuka looked a little nervous, but to his credit, he didn’t hesitate or slow down, he just kept on walking. If I had to take a guess at what was going on in his head, I would have said that he was psyching himself up by reminding himself that summoning a new Servant couldn’t be any scarier than facing down Fafnir.

Arash and Siegfried were already there by the time we made it to the summoning chamber, flanking the door like a pair of armed guards. Arash greeted us with a friendly smile and a jaunty wave, Siegfried with a solemn nod. They followed us into the summoning chamber and took up positions on opposite sides of the dais, far back enough not to interfere with the ritual itself but close enough to intervene if something went wrong.

Da Vinci was several minutes behind us, and she had in tow a familiar spectacled blond man, the technician, Meunier, who had handled the preparations back when Rika summoned Emiya. He made an immediate beeline for the consoles connected to the dais, ignoring us entirely as he got to work setting the system up.

“Mash? If you could put your shield on the platform,” said Romani.

She nodded. “Right!”

She transformed and hefted her giant shield, setting it down in the center of the dais, front facing up, just like she had before.

“As I’m sure you remember, since we’re not using a catalyst, there’s no way to guarantee which Heroic Spirit will answer the summoning,” Romani lectured. “That’s fine. The goal this time is to see if we can find a Heroic Spirit that would work well with you in particular, Ritsuka. Don’t feel like that means we need a powerhouse or some great hero. We’ve already got Arash, Siegfried, and Bradamante.”

“Right,” Ritsuka said with a nod.

“Of course, we wouldn’t say no to someone like Herakles, either,” Romani went on. “Or King Arthur, although that one might get messy, huh, considering Fuyuki... Well, one of the Knights of

the Round Table would still be really good, too. I wouldn't say no to a hero of the Trojan War either, of course."

"Romani," Da Vinci chided him, "you're going to psych him out."

Romani winced. "Sorry, Ritsuka. Just give it your best and don't worry too much about who you get, okay?"

Ritsuka took a deep, calming breath. "I'm ready."

"Do you remember the incantation?" Da Vinci asked.

"Yes."

She turned to Meuniere. "Are we good to go?"

"All systems are up and running." Meuniere adjusted his glasses with one finger. "We're ready whenever you are."

Da Vinci stepped aside and swept her arm out, gesturing to the platform where Rika had stood when she summoned Emiya. "Ritsuka?"

Ritsuka hesitated for a bare second, and then climbed up onto the platform. For a moment, he just stood there, and then he looked back over his shoulder and asked, "So I just...say the incantation, right?"

"If the theatrics help you get in the right headspace, then feel free to indulge," Da Vinci replied. "But yes. The only thing strictly necessary from you is the incantation."

He nodded and turned back around, taking first one, then a second deep, steadying breath, and only then did he throw out his hand, bracing his arm with the other. "Heed my words! My will creates your body and your sword creates my destiny!"

Line after line, in perfect mimicry of how his sister had done it, he shouted the incantation, and the formula arrayed beneath Mash's shield slowly lit up and churned. Brighter and brighter, it grew with each word, and like the spinning of a great propeller blade, a wind began to billow out from it, tossing our hair gently. Ritsuka, so close to the action, faced the brunt of it at its worst, but he didn't flinch or slow at all.

And then a grinding noise started to echo out again, a high pitched whine that grated on the ears. The light grew ever brighter, the wind grew stronger, until I had to squint just to keep my eyes open.

In the center of the array, a form began to take shape, a vague shadow cast in three dimensions, indistinct and blurry.

"Thou the Seven Heavens, clad in the three great words of power!" Ritsuka shouted over the wind. "Come forth from the Ring of Deterrence, Guardian of the Heavenly Scales!"

The light collapsed inwards like a supernova in reverse, coalescing into the figure of a man, tall, dressed in the green finery of a medieval aristocrat. In one hand, he held a thick, leatherbound book,

and along the line of his jaw was a neatly trimmed beard of russet hair. He threw his arms wide and grinned at us.

“It’s good to meet you, Master!” he said grandiosely. He folded himself over one of his arms in an exaggerated bow. “Though I am but a humble bard, I am a Servant of the Caster class! Perhaps you have heard of me before? My name...”

His grin grew broader and took on an almost manic edge.

“...is William Shakespeare!”