

## Chapter XXIII: Requiem for a Queen

I didn't wait for Arash and the others to make it back to Thiers to find out what had happened with their team while Siegfried, Bradamante, and I were busy taking down Dracul.

Of course not. Not that there wasn't any value in getting it directly from the horse's mouth, as it were, but in what world did it make sense to wait two or three days for a first person debriefing when you could get an after action report in minutes?

Instead, I did the smarter thing and went back to the church with Bradamante and Siegfried, and there, away from the townsfolk's prying eyes, I activated my communicator and contacted Romani.

The instant his image appeared, he gave me a quick once over before he turned back to his monitor and checked it to his satisfaction.

"Everything's green for you," he told me when he turned back to me. "Some slight stress on your magic circuits, but that's to be expected when you just got done fighting a Servant — uh, in the collective sense, I mean. Obviously, *you* didn't fight Dracul."

Deciding that discretion was the better part of valor, I deliberately didn't mention the thing with the bug clone. "Of course not."

"Speaking of, congratulations!" he said brightly. "You guys managed to take out Dracul! Man, I thought he was going to be an end boss or something! I was so sure that you were going to wind up fighting him at the very end, right as the Grail was within reach. Talk about a completely unbalanced enemy!"

An end boss? Seriously? Who was he supposed to be? Leet?

"Seriously, you guys overperformed," said Romani. "You especially, Siegfried. I don't want to even imagine how we would've beaten that guy without you there to take him out. You're a massive help."

"We did work really well together!" Bradamante said with a broad grin.

"I was only following my Master's orders," Siegfried demurred, but there was a small, satisfied smile on his face.

"Enough with the accolades, Romani," I said, dragging things back on track. "What happened with the twins and Mash? Arash wouldn't tell me anything because he didn't want to divide his attention."

"Ah." Romani's smile fell. "Yeah, I can see why neither of them has contacted you. Things were... They got a bit rough, over there."

"The dragon?"

"Exactly what you'd expect from the genuine article," Romani said grimly. "A colossal Spirit Origin, magical energy reactions off the charts, stats that would put even a Servant like Siegfried to shame. I know she's been summoning wyverns left, right, and center, but I honestly don't have any idea how

she managed to drag something like that into this time period, let alone how she keeps it under control. It's so ludicrously out of her league that it should have squashed her flat the instant it showed up."

"No, it makes perfect sense," said Siegfried. "Fafnir and I share a destiny. A karmic bond, if you will. I can't say which of us was summoned first, but without a doubt, it's only natural that the other was brought here, too."

My brow furrowed and I turned towards him. "Then if *we* had summoned you..."

And Fafnir hadn't already been here, would we have inadvertently brought a terrible calamity down on this already beleaguered country?

Just imagining it hollowed out the pit of my stomach. What would we have been able to do, if a massive, winged beast big enough to swallow us all whole at once had suddenly appeared when we were trying to summon a dragonslayer? Running would've been pointless against something that huge that could also fly, and a maw that huge breathing fire would've easily wiped out even my biggest swarm, meaning distracting it would have been useless. Any of my bugs that got close probably would have burst, just the same as they did when I sicced them on that wyvern.

Without Siegfried, we would have died right then and there. With him, the only thing we could've done was cower behind Mash's shield and hope he could win.

Siegfried shook his head. "It's unlikely. A proper summoning performed by a proper Master shouldn't pose those sorts of risks, but neither of us would have been properly summoned. To begin with, I shudder to imagine a Master capable and twisted enough to summon Fafnir directly."

"Fafnir?" Romani asked, his voice an entire octave higher. "That was *Fafnir*, the evil dragon from the Volsunga Saga?"

"No," said Siegfried. "I cannot say for certain that there isn't some resemblance between the dragon Sigurd killed and the one I slew. However..." His fingers traced the mark emblazoned across his chest. "This mark identifies him. Only the Fafnir that died by my hands bears this same mark."

I waved it off impatiently. As long as we didn't have to worry about Fafnir resurrecting itself whenever Siegfried did anything, we had the space to figure things out.

"That's not the important part, right now. We can worry about Fafnir and how to deal with him later. Romani — *what happened?*"

"Fafnir..." Romani mumbled with horror.

"Romani!" I snapped.

He jolted. "Wha — oh. Right. I guess the twins wouldn't have told you anything yet, huh?"

"Told me *what?*"

"They ran into three more Servants in the town they went to," said Romani.

My brow furrowed.

“*Three?*”

“I know, we were only expecting one, right? I was as surprised as you were when they all popped up on our instruments.”

“I saw the musician and the knight in copper armor,” I said. “Who’s the third?”

He blinked at me, bewildered.

“*Saw?*”

“Through Arash’s eyes,” I explained shortly.

“Oh,” he mumbled. “Right. You can do that. I totally forgot.”

As much as I liked Romani as a person, I couldn’t wait until Marie was back in charge.

“*Romani. Focus.*”

“Right.” He sighed. “The third was Marie Antoinette, Rider class Servant. That musician you saw is Amadeus Mozart, Caster class Servant. The knight, you’ll be happy to hear —”

“Saint George, right?”

Romani scowled. “I hate it when you do that. It’s bad enough with Da Vinci.”

I ignored him, pretending he hadn’t said anything.

“Marie Antoinette and Mozart?” I said thoughtfully. “They were strays, right? No Master, probably summoned by the world’s autoimmune response?”

“I’m not sure any of that is the proper term for those things,” Romani said wryly, “but yeah. As far as we can tell, all three of them were summoned the same way as Jeanne and Siegfried were. And Bradamante, I suppose.”

But why Marie Antoinette and Mozart, of all people? Siegfried, I could understand. He was a dragonslayer. Even if you took Fafnir out of the mix, it made sense for him to be summoned to deal with a bunch of dragons. Wyverns. Whatever. The same went for Saint George. They had a conceptual advantage against the enemy, and that gave them an edge that another Servant wouldn’t have. Even Bradamante, lacking that advantage, was at least a knight who had earned some acclaim for her martial prowess.

What did Marie Antoinette and Mozart have, though? A musician who paved the way for a lot of the Classical musicians who came after him and a queen who was famous only for her death, remembered prominently for a single quote that might not even have been something she actually said. How were they at all useful against an army of wyverns?

Plus...

“I didn’t see another Servant with them,” I remarked.

I already had a suspicion why, though, as the sequence of events started to take form in my head, and when Romani grimaced, sighed even deeper, and raked a hand through his hair, I didn’t need him to tell me to know what must have happened to her, even if I didn’t know how.

“How did it happen?” I asked quieter.

“She stayed behind to protect the city while the others helped with the evacuation,” Romani said. “Her Noble Phantasm was enough to buy them some time to escape, but...”

“Not enough to stop Fafnir indefinitely,” Siegfried concluded solemnly.

As I’d thought. Marie Antoinette died for her country — again, if you thought about it a certain way.

“There’s a reason he’s considered the preeminent dragon from mythology,” Romani confirmed. “Ritsuka and Rika...didn’t take it that well. They were fast friends.”

“That quickly, huh...”

Sometimes, that was all it took. They’d only been gone for about three days, which meant they probably had all of half a day to get to know her, but the twins didn’t have my trust issues, and even thinking that, I wasn’t so lacking in self-awareness that I didn’t know Lisa had won me over almost as quickly. The tried and true bond might have taken longer, forged over about two months of fighting side by side in battles of the mostly life-threatening variety, but she’d had her hooks in me from nearly the beginning.

A pang of longing echoed in my gut, twisting my insides. God, I missed her.

It made what I was about to say feel all the crueler.

“We won’t be able to give them much time to mourn. A day, maybe, two on the long end. Once they’re back and Bradamante is stable enough to defend the city on her own, we’ll be heading to Orléans to defeat Jeanne Alter and retrieve the Grail.”

Romani blinked at me, bewildered. “Already?”

“Dracul was the heaviest hitting Servant that we know for sure they had,” I said. “With him gone, her biggest threat is Fafnir.” I turned to my newest Servant and gestured his way. “We have Siegfried and Saint George. Between them and Arash, Fafnir and the army of wyverns should be at least manageable, and even if she can summon more, it has to take *time*. During that window, she’ll be vulnerable enough for us to take out. Without her, everything else should fall apart, and then we just have to find the Grail.”

It wasn’t like I hadn’t given it any thought. Yes, I’d said before, we had no idea how many Servants she had at her disposal, and it was entirely possible for her to just summon more ad infinitum. But with the additional help of Emiya, we should have enough firepower to handle those, too, as long as none of them was another dragon-slaying hero and there wasn’t another monster like Dracul.

Even if she *did* summon another powerful Servant... Honestly? Siegfried should still be enough. That cursed wound was the only thing that had kept him from dominating his fight with Dracul, because even with my Command Spell, it was still a detriment, a handicap. Once it was cured, he'd be the strongest Servant in this Singularity, I was sure of it.

We had an A-Rank Servant with a powerful Anti-Army Noble Phantasm, specially designed for killing dragons. We were *much* better off than we had been at La Charité.

Plus — I deliberately avoided glancing at Bradamante — if she decided to come along, that was just one more strong ally to rely on.

“I feel like you *have* to be missing a few steps in there somewhere,” Romani said tightly.

“It’s not going to be as easy as I make it sound,” I acknowledged. “But we have *two* dragon-slaying heroes on our side, now. That’s already more than I was hoping we’d find, back when we were first heading towards Lyon. Between now and then, we’ve defeated three more of her Servants, including the one that I was most cautious about. We could keep running around, trying to gather up more allies, but we might wind up going in circles while she rebuilds her army, and we’ll be no better off then than if we go as soon as possible.”

“What if the Grail isn’t anywhere near her?”

Yeah, there *was* that little snarl, wasn’t there?

I grimaced. “Then we’ll be no closer to finding it if we wait and scour the countryside *before* taking her out.”

“And if her base of operations isn’t at Orléans?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

I wished I was as confident as that sounded. Truthfully, I wasn’t sure it *would* be at Orléans, but I didn’t have any better ideas, either. The best place to set up a fortified defensive position from which to guard a powerful wish-granting device would be someplace that was already conveniently fortified, so a castle in a place as meaningful to her as Orléans made sense.

But she could just as easily be in any other city with a castle. Lyon had at least one, and Paris probably did, too. The best we could do was visit each one in descending order of likeliness and let Romani do a scan, if we couldn’t find it on our own.

The only problem with that was that it would likely take weeks or months, if we went by foot. Ugh. Yeah, there was no way I was letting us take one step into the Roman Singularity without a better idea of how we were going to get between towns and cities that didn’t require us to walk the whole way.

Romani sighed and rubbed agitatedly at his head. “I wish I had a better solution, but I’m a doctor, not a tactician. I’m really not cut out for this sort of thing, so the only thing I can do is hope you know what you’re doing, Taylor.”

*You and me both, Romani.*

“It’s already been almost a month,” I said instead. “We still have another six Singularities to figure out and correct. We can’t afford to spend a decade running around the French countryside.”

“No,” he agreed. “I guess you can’t.” He sighed again. “That’s going to have to be one of the things we plan around in the future, isn’t it? A month for you in that Singularity has only been about five days for us in Chaldea, and if Da Vinci’s right, it’s just going to get even more extreme as we go.”

He shook his head. “Anyway. I’ll send you guys the supplies you’ll need to make the trip to Orléans. That’s about three-hundred-and-twenty-five kilometers, so it’s going to be another long trip.”

Great. My feet were already aching.

“Romani. Don’t tell the twins, just yet. I’ll let them know when they make it back. Let them have the time to grieve, for now.”

I could at least do that much for them, as paltry as it might have been.

Romani gave me a tired smile and mimed zipping his lips, and then his image flickered and disappeared. I collapsed onto a pew with a sigh, and the wood gave a loud creak beneath my weight as though in sympathy. The ceiling above offered no comfort, no advice or answers. Not like I had expected it to in the first place.

What a mess this whole thing was turning out to be. What did it say about me, that the more things went sideways, the more at home I felt?

I looked over at Siegfried. “Are you going to be okay with that? You’re probably only going to get a day or two to recover before we have to head out, again.”

Siegfried gave me a confident smile. “Don’t worry, Master. A day or two will be more than enough. I will be back to top form long before the battle with Fafnir arrives.”

Bradamante glanced back and forth between us, brow furrowed, but didn’t say anything at all.

— o.O.O.O.o —

A day passed in quiet worry for the twins and their group. Early in the morning, after I came back from my morning run through the city streets, Bradamante delivered on her promise and used her second Noble Phantasm to finally break the curse on Siegfried’s wound, and almost immediately afterwards, she’d collapsed onto the nearest pew, utterly exhausted.

Siegfried, on the contrary, was fine only minutes later, and about half an hour after the curse was broken, he pulled back the hem of his bodysuit to reveal unmarred flesh. There wasn’t even a scar to mark the ugly wound he’d received, although as a Servant, I guessed it didn’t make sense for there to be one. As much as he looked like flesh and blood, as warm as his body was beneath my fingertips, and as solid as he had felt carrying me up through the city, he wasn’t a living person. He was just a particularly corporeal ghost. He didn’t scar because that wound wasn’t part of his legend.

Bradamante remained mostly motionless throughout the day, resting to recover her energy. She had even, I realized when I went to check up on her once, fallen asleep, sprawled out on the hard wood of the pew as though it was a plush mattress, complete with temperature regulation.

Maybe Servants were just made of sterner stuff, since they weren't living people. God only knew how much trouble I'd had getting a good night's sleep since we'd dropped into this Singularity. The first thing I was probably going to do when we got back to Chaldea was throw myself on my bed and take a long, well-earned nap.

Contrary to my worst fears, we didn't get a visit from another Servant in the meantime. It seemed, at least for now, that the Dragon Witch either didn't care enough to avenge the loss of Dracul or, as I was hoping, simply didn't have another Servant she was willing to risk to try again. It was entirely possible that she might be regrouping and preparing to come and take us down herself, with Fafnir in tow.

Whatever the case, the rest of the day was quiet and unbothered by enemy action. There wasn't even a stray wyvern to interrupt things and cause trouble.

It was as the sun was setting, casting the city in a faint, orange glow as it sank behind the western hilltops, that Romani contacted me to let me know the twins and their entourage were on the outskirts of town — just in time for Arash to tell me the same thing.

*Master*, he sent to me. *We've made it back.*

“Hold on a moment, Romani,” I told him, and Romani's mouth snapped shut. “That's them, now.”

Siegfried shifted and sat up straighter, his attention now fully on me.

*Any trouble?* I asked Arash.

*None*, was his reply. *It seems we managed to make a clean getaway. We weren't pursued at all on our way back.*

A breath hissed out of my mouth, relieved.

*Can you make it back to the church on your own, or should Siegfried and I meet you halfway?*

There was a moment's pause, and then he said, *We'll make it back to the church without issue, Master. We'll see you shortly.*

After acknowledging that, I turned back to Romani and the others. An exhausted Bradamante sat up on her pew, blinking blearily at me.

“The others are back,” I reported. “Romani, Arash says they didn't run into any of the Dragon Witch's other Servants and Fafnir didn't try to follow them.”

Romani nodded. “That checks out, yeah. It's been a bit harder to separate them all out from each other with so many Servants packed together in a single group, but there wasn't any sign of enemy action that I could detect on their way back. They, ah, made the bulk of the trip pretty quickly, though.”

My brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“They crossed a hundred kilometers in a little over sixty seconds,” Romani said with a bit of a puzzled smile.

I blinked, sure that I must have misheard him. “What?”

Romani shook his head. “They wouldn’t say what happened, when I asked,” he told me. “They just said, ‘Never again,’ like they had just seen some horrible monster. I don’t know what could have happened, though, since they didn’t run into any other Servants. They didn’t give me any more of an explanation than that. Even Emiya looked pretty shaken.”

There was a story there, I was certain of it. If the twins and Mash wouldn’t give it to me, I was sure that Arash wouldn’t have any qualms explaining what had happened.

“You got Emiya out to them?”

“Rika had to use a Command Spell to call him closer, and by then, they’d already escaped the town, but yes,” said Romani. He sighed. “I’m going to miss his meals. He was the only decent chef we had left.”

“I’m certain Sir Emiya will be more content to have his martial skills put to use ending this Singularity,” Siegfried said kindly.

Romani grimaced. “Sir Emiya? Man, I can’t even imagine addressing him like that. Is that a bad thing? He’s a Heroic Spirit, after all.”

It sounded strange to me, too, although I didn’t admit as much. Given what little I knew about Emiya was mostly related to his tactics, he didn’t seem particularly knightly, so calling him like he was one just felt awkward.

“Well,” Romani went on, “I guess on our end, it’s only going to be for a day or two, depending on how much longer it takes you to wrap this up. Speaking of, are you absolutely sure about this, Taylor? What if she’s expecting you and she’s summoned a whole army of other Servants?”

“If we keep worrying about what-ifs without having any concrete idea what she’s doing and where, then we’ll be here forever,” I told him flatly. “It’s not like we’ve scoured the entire countryside, but Orléans is the one place we’ve avoided going completely. At the very least, it’s worth a look, and we’re not any worse off now than we would be if we waited a month.”

Romani sighed. “The worst part is that I can’t argue with any of that. You’re right that we can’t just let her continue to build power and raze the country until Thiers is the last stronghold or something like that, but at the same time, I really don’t like the idea of you guys throwing yourselves into danger, even if I’m the one who sent the four of you into that Singularity in the first place. Five,” he corrected. “I forgot about Fou.”

I snorted. “Fou is the one in the least amount of danger,” I said wryly.

Romani eyed me. “One of these days, I’ll figure out what it is you two have against each other.”



“The instant I can explain it, I’ll tell you myself,” I promised.

Once again, Romani sighed, and he glanced over at something on his monitor. “They’re back,” he informed me. “They should be at the door —”

*Master*, Arash said as a pair of knocks sounded from the door.

“— right now. I’ll send you some supplies for your trip in the morning. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” I bade absently as the door swung open.

In walked Mash, who looked utterly exhausted, and then an equally downtrodden Jeanne, and behind her were the twins, haggard and tired, like soldiers coming off of the battlefield, and after the twins was the musician, Mozart, and the copper knight, Saint George. Emiya and Arash brought up the rear, and they closed the door behind themselves.

“Miss Taylor,” Mash mumbled when she caught sight of me, and then her eyes landed on Siegfried and widened. “Ah, Mister Siegfried! You’re looking much better!”

Siegfried smiled one of his understated smiles, a thing entirely of his closed lips and baring not the slightest hint of teeth. “Lady Bradamante undid the curse this morning. I’m back to normal now.”

Saint George looked over and gave a small nod. “It seems my services aren’t necessary, in that case.”

“Your help against the Dragon Witch will be appreciated regardless,” I said.

He nodded again. “And you shall have it.”

Jeanne was the first to approach. “Romani told us that Thiers was attacked as well?”

“Dracul,” I confirmed. “We managed to take him out through some clever maneuvering and Siegfried’s Noble Phantasm. Take a seat, everyone. There’s a lot to go over.”

The group split up and each took to a pew. The twins and Mash sat together closer to where I was standing in the aisle. Emiya took a seat further back, hunched over and hands folded between his spread knees. Saint George eased himself down carefully, mindful of his armor. Mozart folded his legs and clasped his hands like some kind of old-timey gentleman. Jeanne sat in the pew directly across the aisle from the twins and Mash, while Arash stayed standing in the back, leaning over the back pew.

We traded stories back and forth about what had happened. The twins and Mash went first, although it was really Mash and Jeanne who did most of the talking. They went into more detail than Romani had, explaining about how they had met Marie Antoinette and Mozart on their way towards town — the twins both flinched at the mention of her — who themselves were wandering the countryside trying to shepherd as many refugees towards safety as they could, because neither of them was strong enough to face the Dragon Witch or her retinue.

“Despite everything, she could smile so brightly,” Ritsuka muttered, staring at the back of the pew in front of him.

Then, chasing rumors of another Servant protecting the town westward of them, they made their way towards Périgueux, where they met Saint George. They stayed there overnight under the care of the Saint-Étienne friars, and they'd barely rolled out of bed in the morning to start talking about him helping Siegfried when Jeanne Alter showed up on her personal steed: Fafnir.

"I thought for sure that was the end of us," Mash confessed. "He was so massive, it was like he blotted out the sun."

*If it had come to it, Arash admitted to me silently, I would have used my Noble Phantasm.*

I glanced at him, but offered no reproach. It was, as harsh as it might be to say it, exactly what I would have expected him to do.

Jeanne Alter had tried to kill them, but working together, Mash and Jeanne's Noble Phantasms were enough to block the first attack, if only just. Saint George refused to leave as long as the townsfolk were still there, so together, while the civilians ran, they had managed to hold off Fafnir long enough to evacuate as many as they could.

Marie Antoinette stayed behind to distract Jeanne Alter long enough for the rest of them to escape. Her Noble Phantasm, Crystal Palace, had held strong while they fled into the forest. None of them had seen what became of her, but none of them had needed to. No one in the room was under any illusions about the fact she hadn't planned to make it out herself.

"I see," Siegfried said solemnly. "She was indeed a worthy queen of France."

I glanced at him askance, but managed to keep my mouth shut, because whatever she'd been guilty of during her actual reign, at least here, she had sacrificed herself for the people of her country.

"Maria would be delighted to hear you say that, Sir Siegfried," said Mozart with a smile.

From there, they had hurried as far away from Périgueux as they could as quickly as they could, and it was about then that Emiya had been Rayshifted into the Singularity. Rika was forced to use a Command Spell to get him to them as quickly as possible. After that, they made their way back to Thiers as fast as their legs would carry them, since they'd been forced to leave their horses behind.

"Romani said you guys crossed about a hundred kilometers in about a minute," I pointed out. "How did you manage that?"

Ritsuka, Rika, and Mash all shared a look and immediately clamped up. Jeanne had gone pale white and only gave me a smile and an awkward laugh. Emiya grimaced. Mozart looked away, hand over his mouth like the memory made him sick. Even Saint George turned his head down and remained silent.

When I turned to Arash for answers, he gave them to me telepathically: *Emiya projected a large sled, and I shot an arrow attached to it while everyone held on. The landing was a bit rough, but the rest of it worked out as intended.*

That was it?

I swept my gaze around the rest of them, who all looked like they'd been through Hell and come out the other side traumatized.

That was what they were all so tightlipped about? It didn't sound like that big of a deal.

"In any case," I said, "as I'm sure Romani told you, while you were dealing with Fafnir, Dracul attacked Thiers. Bradamante, Siegfried, and I worked together to take him out."

A moment passed in silence. The twins looked at me expectantly.

"That's it?" Rika asked. "B-but you didn't really tell us anything, Senpai!"

"There has to be more to it than just that," Mash agreed.

With a sigh, I launched into the story, a little less abbreviated, this time. There just wasn't much to tell, though. It really wasn't any more complicated than Siegfried keeping him busy, Bradamante hitting him with her Noble Phantasm, and then Siegfried finishing him off with Balmung.

"That means Berserk Assassin, Phantom, Saint Martha, and Dracul are all taken care of," I finished. "Which means that now is the best time to strike and beat her."

I laid out the plan, such as it existed. I played down the uncertainties, although I acknowledged they existed, and I set about explaining how we were going to deal with Jeanne Alter and her army. What to do if she summoned more Servants and wyverns, the important bits we needed to focus on. It was really more barebones than I liked, but no one protested.

"As soon as Bradamante is back on her feet and ready to defend Thiers, we're heading out," I said at the end. "We'll march to Orléans and end this, once and for all."

"Good," said Rika with vicious heat.

"The sooner we defeat her, the less people have to die," Ritsuka added with equal strength.

"My evil self has plagued this country for long enough," Jeanne agreed.

The rest of the Servants offered no arguments against it, and with our course decided, we broke for dinner, ate a bland but hearty stew Emiya concocted from our rations, and we all called it a night.

As we settled down to sleep in our borrowed cots and the city settled down with us, slowly and quietly, a sad, haunting melody began to play, echoing through the church's rafters and out the windows. I was about to reach out into my swarm to check on it, and then I recognized it and let it go. I wasn't so callous that I would go out and stop it. We all mourned in our own ways.

That night, four hundred years early, *Requiem* graced the country of France as Mozart said goodbye to its queen.