

## Chapter XX: Paladin at Thiers

The instant Saint Martha was gone, Siegfried collapsed to his knees, as though her presence was the only thing keeping him upright. He supported himself with his sword, the tip thrust into the ground, and his other hand clutched at his side, where his wound still persisted.

Rika squawked. “Hey, is he okay?”

“Fou, fou!”

The little menace leapt from off of her shoulder and scurried over to Siegfried, and as much as it sent a shiver down my spine to follow it, the rest of us took off and jogged over to Mash and Siegfried. At least for the moment, there didn’t appear to be any other Servants nearby to worry about. For whatever that was worth, when the Tarasque had burned through so much of my swarm.

“Senpai!” Mash called as we approached.

“Good going, Mash!” Rika cheered, grinning, and then she turned to Siegfried worriedly. “This guy doesn’t look too good, though.”

“I’m...sorry, Master,” Siegfried said, looking up at me with a pained expression. “Even just that much...took a lot more out of me...than I expected.”

“You did well,” I told him. “Exactly what I needed you to do.”

He sighed, and something of a relieved smile broke out on his face. In a movie, that would have been the cliché moment where he died, having succeeded in his mission or rescued the princess, but fortunately, his form stayed solid and corporeal, and he seemed in no danger of fading away, just yet.

Yet. That was the part that worried me. That wound needed to be dealt with sooner rather than later, or else it was going to become a liability in short order. The very last thing we needed was to run into another pack of wyverns or one of Jeanne Alter’s Servants and Siegfried be too weakened to fight back. The Armor of Fafnir would help, but the wound itself already proved that it was possible to get through that and deal a heavy blow.

“Is he okay?” Ritsuka asked, concerned.

“Jeanne Alter and her Servants wounded him, and because it’s cursed, it won’t heal,” I summarized for the twins. “He won’t be able to fight until we break the curse and heal the wound.”

“I did everything I could,” Jeanne lamented, “but I’m afraid...with my abilities as diminished as they are...”

“You can’t break the curse,” Mash concluded.

*Beep-beep!*

“— got through!” Romani said. “Thank goodness! That interference was really strong!”

“Doctor Roman!” said the twins together.

“Contract registered, by the way!” said Romani. “Saber class Servant, Siegfried, hero of the *Nibelungenlied*. It turns out your instinct was right on the money, Taylor! This is definitely a top class, Rank A Servant!”

He grinned.

“And two Spirit Origins have disappeared, as well! A-ah, we didn’t detect the last one until moments before it was snuffed out, but you definitely managed to handle Saint Martha! Congratulations, everyone!”

With a quiet thump, Arash landed next to us. “Doctor.”

“Arash Kamangir,” Romani replied respectfully. “Thank you for looking out for everyone.”

“Just doing my job,” said Arash, smiling.

Romani looked over at something on his console. “Everyone’s vitals are all in the green. No injuries, no one’s hurt, and thank God, no one died. I’d call that a success. Although...”

Yes. “Although.” There was no way he could have missed it, that little hitch.

“You can see it, right?” I asked.

Romani nodded.

“Siegfried’s Saint Graph has some irregularities in it. Damage that predates the contract, along with some kind of status effect. Was there something that happened before you made contact?”

“It’s a curse,” Jeanne said sourly. “My other self... My evil counterpart and her minions inflicted it upon him. I can’t lift it as I am.”

“If it’s lingering this long and managed to get through his Noble Phantasm,” Romani hedged, frowning, “it’s likely the result of a Noble Phantasm itself. You’d need either a specialized Noble Phantasm or else a bona fide saint to lift it... A-ah, I mean, n-not that you’re not a saint, Jeanne —”

“Whatever history says of me, I don’t think of myself as one,” Jeanne interrupted, and then she sighed. “However, whether or not I am one, in my current state, I can’t do anything more.”

And without her, we were fresh out of the other two things, weren’t we? Damn it.

“Maybe Emiya has something?” Ritsuka suggested tentatively.

“Emiya?” Arash echoed.

“Our emergency backup,” I explained shortly. “An Archer class Servant who can reproduce Noble Phantasms, at the cost of lowered performance.”

Arash, Jeanne, and Siegfried all reacted in a way I honestly should have expected: with surprise. In hindsight, being told a Heroic Spirit could make copies of the things that made other Heroic Spirits special wasn't something ordinary even among Servants. I had to start thinking of it like Tinkertech — even other Tinkers couldn't just casually reproduce a Tinker's work, and mass producing them was the Holy Grail of Tinkering.

And I just compared Emiya to Dragon in my head. I wasn't sure who should have been flattered more.

"I've never heard of such a Heroic Spirit before," Arash said.

"Neither had we," Romani told him. "As far as our records are concerned, he didn't exist before Taylor, Ritsuka, and Rika saw him in Fuyuki."

Arash shook his head. "You would think a Heroic Spirit with such a unique talent would be well-known."

"According to Emiya, his capacity for reproduction increased dramatically after his ascension — or rather, he couldn't just throw around copied Noble Phantasms willy nilly while he was alive, and large parts of his repertoire were only acquired during his summonings as a Servant," Romani said. "In any case, I could ask him, but I don't think he'll be able to help with this. Remember, he's limited to bladed weapons, and swords aren't really made for healing, you know?"

My lips pursed as an idea came to mind.

"You could ask him, but I'm not sure we need him," I said. "How easy is it to send him here, anyway?"

Romani scratched at the back of his head. "There's some sort of time differential between you guys and Chaldea. We can keep track of you and where you're heading, but even if it takes *you* a week to get somewhere, for us, it's a few hours to maybe a day or so. Da Vinci thinks the difference is going to get even more extreme the further back you go and the bigger the deviation from proper history."

"So?" Ritsuka prodded.

"I'm getting there!" Romani said. "It means that, when we're not in direct contact like this, it's harder to pinpoint your exact location at any given moment. Chaldea's a little more accurate than a GPS, but for us, you guys are moving around like a car on a highway. That's why I'm sometimes late announcing the presence of an incoming Servant. By the time the sensors pick it up and I get the readout, you guys are already fighting. And that's when interference doesn't make connecting impossible to begin with."

I made a noise of understanding in my throat.

"So if you tried to Rayshift Emiya to us, there's no guarantee he'd even land in our general area. Rika might have to use a Command Spell just to bring him to us."

Waste one, I meant, and everyone picked up on that.

Romani nodded. “Basically, yeah.”

“Why didn’t you just say that?” Rika groaned. “That wasn’t that hard to understand!”

“Wha — h-hey!” Romani squawked. “I’m doing my best here, you know! This isn’t exactly my normal job!”

“Romani.” I brought the conversation back around before it could devolve. “If we forget about bringing Emiya in for now, can you detect any other Servants to the west or east?”

“Hang on a second.”

He went back to the monitor, showing us the side of his face as he looked away.

“It’s far enough away that the resolution isn’t great, but I’m definitely detecting the presence of at least one Servant west of you, at a city called Thiers, roughly one-hundred-twenty kilometers from your current location, and there might be one even further out past that. If it’s even there, it’s at least twice as far, so I’m sorry I can’t give you anything more concrete.”

I nodded. “And the one at Thiers, can you detect human vital signs in its general vicinity?”

Everyone turned to look at me, eyes wide.

“Oh my,” said Jeanne. “That’s clever.”

“H-holy crap!” Romani said. “H-hang on a second, I’ll — Da Vinci’s going to cackle like a madman when she hears about this one!”

“Human vital signs?” Mash asked. “I don’t understand.”

“Aside from our team, there should only be two kinds of Servants here,” I explained while Romani checked the sensors. “Those who are on Jeanne Alter’s side, and therefore will be slaughtering every living person they come across, and those on the side of the French people, who will fight back and protect the innocent citizens. If there’s a Servant at Thiers *and* a bunch of people still alive there —”

“Then that Servant is protecting them!” Ritsuka concluded.

“That’s awesome!” said Rika. “I don’t see how that helps us, though.”

“Jeanne was obviously summoned to fight her evil self, the Dragon Witch.” I nodded at her, and she grimaced, but didn’t protest the point. “But here at Lyon, we found Siegfried, a dragon-slaying hero, specifically suited for killing Jeanne Alter’s wyverns. There’s no guarantees, but if the Servants summoned are responses meant to match the threat, then the Servant at Thiers just might be another dragonslayer.”

“It could be Sigurd,” Mash suggested.

Siegfried nodded. “It’s possible. Though our legends are similar, he and I are two different Heroic Spirits. If the threat is dragons, he may have been summoned as well.”

“Maybe,” I conceded, because it wasn’t impossible. “But if he wasn’t, then there’s one other dragon-slaying hero that might have been called.”

“Saint George,” Romani said. “I’ve got a reading, and your instinct was right again, Taylor. I can’t get an exact number, but there are numerous human life signs located at Thiers. It looks like whoever the Servant is there is protecting the city along with all of the people inside it.”

My lips curled into a small smile.

“Can you tell if it’s Saint George or not?” Jeanne asked.

Romani shook his head. “I’ve already explained, I don’t have that kind of resolution from this far away. Not without one of the Masters having seen the Servant with their own eyes. The only thing I can tell you from here is the general location. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not ideal,” I allowed, because it really would have been better to know who or what we were dealing with for sure, “but it’s better than what we had to go on five minutes ago. We don’t really have much better in the way of options, right now, unless you want to take another shot at summoning?”

I addressed the last part to Romani, who grimaced.

“Even if we tried, there still isn’t a guarantee that who you summon will be of immediate use,” he said. “We already tried to summon Siegfried, right? Arash answered instead, and we found Siegfried later. So if we tried to summon Saint George and it turns out he’s the one at Thiers, won’t we just have filled up one of our open slots and increased the strain on you Masters unnecessarily?”

That wasn’t *exactly* my thought process. But it wasn’t completely off the mark, either.

“Then our next destination should be Thiers,” I concluded. “Whether or not Saint George is there, the odds are good that the Servant there will be an ally. At the very least, we’ll be able to rest and brainstorm the next step from there.”

Arash nodded. “It’ll be a nice break from camping out every night.”

“Is it really that big of a deal?” Ritsuka asked. “Rika and I haven’t really been feeling any strain from supporting Mash or anything. Right, Rika?”

“The only things strained are my legs!” Rika reported cheerily.

Very deliberately, I stopped myself from rolling my eyes.

“That’s because Chaldea’s doing most of the heavy lifting,” Romani told them. “The more Servants you contract with, especially out in the field instead of inside Chaldea itself, the more you guys will have to pick up the slack with your own power. Right now, Ritsuka, Rika, you two are only supporting Mash, and Taylor is only supporting Siegfried and Arash. If you just kept summoning as many Servants as you could, you would definitely start to feel the strain. If they all started fighting the next time you ran into an enemy Servant, the drain might just kill you.”

The twins both blanched. I didn't have any idea what they were imagining it would look like to be drained dry of magical energy, but the image in my head was of a desiccated corpse, sunken-cheeked and so brittle it flaked away at the slightest touch.

"Then, it seems our next course of action has been decided," Jeanne concluded. "We will make our way to Thiers in the hopes of finding another ally and work out our next step from there. Are there any objections?"

"I'm sorry," Siegfried mumbled. "You're going through all of this trouble for me."

I shook my head. "Getting help for you is one thing, but Thiers probably would have been our next stop anyway. We'll need as much help as we can get to fight Jeanne Alter and her army."

Siegfried's expression drew out into determination. "Then I won't let your efforts go to waste. Once my injury has been healed, Master, I will ensure the Dragon Witch is destroyed. This, I swear."

— o.O.O.O.o —

Not for the first time, I lamented the lack of industrial era conveniences in fifteenth-century France. It probably wouldn't be the last. Without a car to take us there, the journey of a few hours became a few days, and while we didn't have as far to go as before, Siegfried's disability slowed us down by at least a whole day, so it still took us the better part of a week to go from Lyon to Thiers. It didn't help that the terrain got far less flat the closer to our destination we got, to the point where "rolling hills" was a frustratingly accurate description of the obstacles we had to cross.

And unfortunately, by the time the sun had set and we settled down at the end of the fourth day, we still had another few hours of travel before we could crest the final hill overlooking the valley Thiers was nestled into, which meant another night of camping out in the wilderness.

For a certain value of the word "camping," at any rate. We didn't have nice, expensive tents or comfortable sleeping bags, and the only things we had for pillows were our own clothing, which didn't exactly make for the most comfortable of rests. The only small mercy we had was that my powers let me keep things like mosquitoes from harassing us, and that meant we didn't have to wake up in the morning with unexplained bites swelling on every stretch of exposed skin.

Not for the first time, and definitely not for the last, I was jealous of the Servants who didn't have to sleep. Jeanne did anyway, and so did Mash, but Arash was always taking the night watch to keep an eye out for us, and Siegfried didn't sleep, exactly, so much as he closed his eyes and tried to move as little as possible throughout the night.

Trying not to aggravate his wound was my guess. Or conserving magical energy. It might have been both at once.

That night, the twins fell asleep almost instantly. They were huddled up next to each other on the edge of our little bonfire, and despite how uncomfortable sleeping on the hard ground was, they were sawing logs without a care in the world.

With Arash off in the dark, staying away from the fire to maintain his night vision, and Siegfried set off to the side, engaged in his nightly imitation of a statue, it left Jeanne and I alone in a rare moment of solitude.

Not for much longer, I knew. I was handling it all better than the twins were, but walking all day still took a lot out of me, too. With food in my belly and my body aching from a long day, I'd be heading off to dreamland myself, soon. It took everything I had just to stifle my yawns.

"Do you think she was right?" Jeanne asked into the silence.

I blinked at her, uncomprehending. "Who?"

"My other self," Jeanne said quietly. "My...evil self. Jeanne Alter."

Oh. One of *those* conversations, then.

"About?"

"The reason my abilities are so diminished," Jeanne clarified. "Why I'm...not as strong as I should be." She was quiet for a moment longer, and then went on. "I know I said it so confidently back then, but... Could it be true that *I'm* the fake, and she's the real Jeanne?"

Wasn't *that* a loaded question?

"Do you think you're fake?" I asked.

"I...I don't *feel* like I'm fake, but..." She trailed off for a moment, then started again. "If I was nothing more than the idealized version of Jeanne that the people of France believed in, would I even know for sure?"

I didn't know how to answer that. I didn't really know that there was any good answer to begin with.

"I'm not sure what you're expecting me to tell you," I said. "It's not like I knew you when you were alive or anything. I can't say one way or the other which one of you feels and acts the way the real Jeanne d'Arc did while she was still living and breathing."

But I definitely knew that Jeanne wouldn't appreciate me telling her that I thought Jeanne Alter's way of thinking was more realistic. It felt more natural for someone to hate the people who abandoned her, to feel like everyone who turned their backs on her deserved to have everything she'd ever given to them ripped away. For the French, to whom Jeanne delivered everything, having everything destroyed was...not the appropriate response, but the one that matched what she'd done for their sakes.

What she'd sacrificed for their sakes.

Jeanne frowned miserably at the smoldering embers of our fire.

“But,” I continued, “I’ve heard enough of the stories about her to know she didn’t begrudge anyone for what happened. The English for their partisanship, maybe, the clergy who condemned her on every trumped up charge they could, probably, but not the people or the country she’d given up everything for.”

It felt like a lie. It was all true, of course, and none of it was wrong, but people could change a lot in the moments of their death. As she burned at the pyre, it was entirely possible the real Jeanne d’Arc had cursed everyone and everything even remotely connected to it. Maybe it was even likely.

I didn’t tell her that.

“Yes.” Jeanne closed her eyes and bowed her head. “I accepted it, at the end. The English, the clergy, they tricked me into a false confession. But I knew...from the beginning, didn’t I? I knew that I would never return to the simple life of a farm girl the instant I left home to seek out King Charles. I knew what I was giving up for my people and what it would cost me.”

She clutched her hands to her chest.

“I remember the moment I knew what I must do,” she said quietly. “I remember making the decision to leave. I remember it all. My mother’s tears. My father’s love. My brothers’ embrace. The smiling faces of my countrymen, liberated. The jeers of the crowd as I burned.” She pushed out her arms, as though throwing something into the flames. “I remember that final moment as I offered my body unto God.”

A small smile pulled at her lips. “Those are all things the real Jeanne d’Arc did. Those are all things the real Jeanne d’Arc felt. Those are all the things *I* lived and felt.”

*She might remember all of that, too,* I thought but didn’t say. It felt like the wrong thing to say in that moment.

If someone told me that my Echidna clone was just as much a real person, a real *Taylor Hebert*, as I was, just because she had all of my memories, too, would I have been able to accept that? Could I say a dark mirror was equally as valid as the original?

No. And when you looked at it like that, Jeanne Alter was just as much Jeanne’s dark mirror, a tainted reflection corrupted by Flauros’ Grail.

Even if we said Jeanne Alter’s feelings were valid, that didn’t mean what she was doing wasn’t wrong. Real or fake, she was still the enemy, and we had to stop her. Whether or not she was the genuine article would just make it more or less tragic.

“We should get some sleep,” I said. “Tomorrow, we’ll be meeting whoever is at Thiers. We can’t afford to be exhausted, especially if they attack before asking questions.”

“You’re right.” She offered me a radiant smile. “Thank you, Taylor. Your words helped dispel my doubts.”

I gave her a smile and a nod, perfunctory. I didn’t know how I’d really helped her when she mostly seemed to have talked herself around, but if she thought I’d helped, then I wasn’t going to argue.



Turning away from the fire, I settled down, pillowed my head beneath one arm, and closed my eyes. Jeanne did something similar.

A long breath eased out of my nostrils, and I tried to still my mind long enough to sleep.

It seemed only seconds later that I was waking up to the morning sun on my face, feeling like I hadn't much rested at all.

The fire had burned down at some point, and as I gingerly sat up, I found everyone mostly where I'd left them the night before. The twins had shifted and moved around a little, but Siegfried remained where he was, utterly still but for his even breathing, and next to me, Jeanne began to stir, as well, probably because she'd felt me moving.

Briefly, I closed my eyes and stretched out my senses, feeling out my swarm. I'd lost some in the night, of course, to predation and any number of other factors, but nothing major had disturbed them. Of course not, because it would have jolted me awake, but it never hurt to check.

A mental prod at the thread connecting me to Arash got me a silent affirmation back, a sort of wordless "I'm here" to let me know he hadn't been assassinated in the middle of the night. It only took a moment's concentration to send the order for him to make his way back from wherever it was he'd been keeping watch.

Now that everything else had been taken care of, I stood gingerly, sighing, and went over to wake up the twins. They were about as enthusiastic about getting up as I was, because as much as you could get used to sleeping on the ground and learn to live with the associated aches, those aches never stopped being new when you woke up to them in the morning.

Siegfried was roused with nothing more than a quiet grunt to show his discomfort. He stood slowly and carefully, mindful of his wound, but although I thought he must have fallen asleep sitting there for the entire night, he showed no signs that he'd ever even started to doze.

I would have bet that if I asked him, he would have told me that he'd been awake and on guard the whole time. I wasn't sure I could even doubt it.

Arash returned around that time, and a quick chat later, Romani sent us provisions for our breakfast — that showed up five feet in the air above Mash's shield. Small mercies that none of it was fragile enough to make a mess.

After a brief and largely tasteless meal (accented by some chocolate protein bars that were actually pretty good), we started up our journey again and continued our hike towards Thiers.

"Do you have any more information about the Servant in the city?" I asked Romani as we walked.

"Sorry, I don't," he answered. Static tinged his words around the edges. Without a ley line terminal, a stable connection to Chaldea seemed like it was too much to ask for, but Romani and his sensors were the only line of information about the Servant at Thiers and the larger movements by Jeanne Alter that we had.

"Nothing?"

He shook his head. “I can tell you that he doesn’t seem to have moved outside of the city itself, and also that there doesn’t seem to have been any significant drop in the city’s human population, but even this far out, I’m just speaking in a general sense.”

My lips pulled into a frown. “What about Jeanne Alter and her forces? Do we have any idea what they’ve been up to for the last week?”

Romani shrugged and sighed, leaning back in his chair. “Sorry, I can’t tell you much there, either. I’ve been checking back in whenever you guys settle down for the night, but the best I can give you is that there’s been movement by Servants. I couldn’t tell you one way or the other what she’s doing or why, only that she *is* doing something.”

That was more helpful than nothing, and we stuck to that for a while, discussing different things she might have been doing and reasons she might have been shuffling her “troops” around. Probably trying to spare the twins’ feelings, Romani kept things steered away from the obvious, that she was going out and burning down whatever town, village, or city caught her eye on any given day.

I didn’t think the twins missed that, but neither of them brought it up themselves. They were inexperienced, not stupid.

Eventually, we found ourselves on a road that seemed to have been excavated out of the hillside, a relatively narrow pass that had a steep upward slope to the right, enough space for a decently sized merchant caravan to ride, and then another steep slope to the left. The drop was sheer enough that I didn’t like the odds of us surviving uninjured if me or one of the twins fell down it.

“— at Lyon,” Romani was saying. “I shouldn’t need to tell you, but she definitely knows you were there and she definitely knows you killed Saint Martha and Phantom. The next Servant she sends is definitely going to be even harder to fight. You guys need to be on your guard. She might even send two.”

“Being double-teamed is cheating,” Rika muttered sourly.

“Doctor Roman,” said Ritsuka, who had been mostly silent the rest of the conversation, “has anything happened at La Charité?”

Romani sighed, grimacing. At length, he reluctantly said, “There are no human life signs at La Charité, as of now.”

Ritsuka scowled, staring hard at the ground. His fists clenched. Rika, too, looked miserable, and Mash had the appearance of a kicked puppy.

I didn’t want to say that I’d told him so. This was one of those things I would have gladly been wrong about.

“That doesn’t mean anything on its own,” Romani added. “It’s entirely possible that the people who evacuated all left for another town. They might have —”

“Doctor Roman,” Ritsuka interrupted quietly. “Please.”

Romani was silent for a moment.

“I’m sorry, Ritsuka.”

Something chimed on Romani’s end, and he lunged forward, eyes wide, and shouted, “Incoming Servant detected!”

We had barely a moment to register his words before something fell out of the sky like a ballistic missile.

“Master!” Mash shouted, and she threw herself in front of the group, her shield materializing in front of her.

The other Servant landed with a thunderous crash some twenty feet or so down the road, kicking up hunks of rock with the impact. They’d moved so fast that I hadn’t even had time for my bugs to pick up their movement before they’d landed.

She, I realized as I took in her figure. Definitely a woman, dressed in a long, almost military-style coat, knee-high boots, and elbow-length gloves, all accented with small plates of gold armor and all predominantly white and blue with red piping. Her long, golden hair looked frankly ridiculous in a pair of tails that reached almost to her knees.

The most striking thing, however, was not her appearance nor the tiny lance she carried in one hand, but the blazing star of a shield strapped to her other. At its center was a gold ornament with eight points, but radiating out from those points were eight spokes of pure energy, light solidified.

For an instant, she reminded me of Glory Girl.

“Halt!” she said firmly, brandishing the glittering, crystalline head of the miniaturized thing she called a lance at us. “Take not one step further! If you value your lives, turn around and leave this place immediately!”

She tilted her head back, staring down at us imperiously. It only made my mental comparison to Glory Girl all the stronger.

“I am the Lancer class Servant, Bradamante!” she declared. “The town of Thiers and its people are under my protection! You’re not welcome here!”