

Chapter XXX: As the Bard Would Tell It

I didn't know who I might have been expecting to answer Ritsuka's summons. Sure, Arash had answered mine, and the more I interacted with him, the more I could see why he could be called compatible with me. Our ways of thinking weren't exactly mirrors, but there were similarities, and in battle, he and I had worked well together throughout France.

How Rika and Emiya connected, on the other hand, I didn't quite understand, because they weren't that much alike at all. Maybe as they fought together more, it would become more obvious, but right then, I didn't see it.

With that in mind, I hadn't really had any expectations for Ritsuka, at least not regarding a particular hero. Considering the sense of justice I'd seen of him while we were hoofing it through the French countryside, I'd had in my head the vague image of someone morally upright, like a knight or a saint. Hell, considering we'd spent a month with her, maybe even Jeanne herself would have shown up.

Shakespeare was so far off my list that he wasn't even on it.

"Who?" Rika asked.

I grimaced. Really, Rika?

Shakespeare gasped and clutched at his heart, whirling to face her with a rictus of horror stretching his mouth. "You've never heard of me?"

"H-he's one of the most famous playwrights in history!" Mash added, agreeing with him. "Senpai! How could you not have heard about him? His works are taught in literature and English language courses all over the world!"

Rika laughed awkwardly. "Well, see, about that..."

Ritsuka sighed. "She almost failed English in high school."

"Onii-chan!" Rika whined. "You're not supposed to say that about your favorite sister!"

"I had to tutor her just so she could get a passing grade," he went on, ignoring her entirely. "I refused to speak Japanese to her at home for a whole year, including vacations."

"You're giving away my secrets!" Rika complained. "I'll never get a husband if you don't let me keep at least a few! A girl thrives on her mystery!"

"I pretended not to hear her unless she spoke in English," he added, hammering in the final nail.

One of my eyebrows rose, and I slanted a meaningful look in Rika's direction. "Well, it seems to have worked."

"Senpai!" Rika shouted. "Not you, too!"

“Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful!” Shakespeare proclaimed, and when I turned back to him, he was...

“Are you...writing this down?”

He was scribbling in the book he was holding with a long, feathery quill.

“Of course!” he said, grinning. “For what is art but an imitation of life? What is the world but a stage, and all the people on it actors?”

Right, okay, Shakespeare was an eccentric. In hindsight, that probably should have been obvious from the beginning, but it had been a while since I last touched any of his works, and for as much as I enjoyed reading, classical literature hadn’t been high on my list of priorities for the past four years and change.

You know, end of the world. Kind of hard to enjoy hobbies when you were trying to eke out every last possible advantage that would let you stop it.

“No!” Rika squawked. “You can’t! Don’t write all of that down! I’d just die of embarrassment if everyone read about that!”

Shakespeare just kept grinning.

“A comedy! A tragedy! All have their value, my dear!”

From off to the side, Romani coughed pointedly.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said politely, although he didn’t sound particularly sorry at all, and the smile on his face belied his humor, “but we can’t stand here making fun of Rika all day —”

“Hey!”

“— so maybe we should formalize the contract, now?”

“Of course, of course!” The book snapped shut, trapping the quill in its pages, and Shakespeare pressed a hand to his chest again. “As I said, I am William Shakespeare, Servant of the Caster class.” He offered his hand to Ritsuka. “Might I know the name of my Master?”

Ritsuka didn’t look like he knew what he was supposed to do, but after a second, he took Shakespeare’s hand and shook it. “Fujimaru Ritsuka — ah, Ritsuka Fujimaru, that is. Pleased to...meet you?”

Shakespeare grinned. “The pleasure is all mine, Master.”

Romani sighed. “Well, it’s not exactly the orthodox way of confirming the contract, but I guess that’ll do.”

“The exact wording doesn’t matter, just as long as the contract is finalized,” said Da Vinci. “Though I have to admit... Ah, Shakespeare, I’m not sure why you’re here.”

“I was summoned, of course!” he answered.

Da Vinci smiled, but it was very obviously forced. “That’s not quite what I...meant, exactly. Although I suppose... A Heroic Spirit of your nature doesn’t exactly fit something like the Saber class, do you?”

“I should hope not!” Shakespeare said, aghast. “Why, that would be a dreadful idea indeed! Perhaps the pen is mightier than the sword, but I should think I wouldn’t take the one into battle against the other!”

Off to the side, Arash hid a chuckle behind his fist.

“What Da Vinci is dancing around,” I cut in, “is what can you do, exactly?”

Siegfried winced, and so did Romani. “You could have put it more delicately, Taylor...”

Shakespeare didn’t seem offended by my bluntness.

“I would shudder to think you might send me into combat,” he said. “Indeed, I am the last man to be relied upon with my fists or a weapon. I confess, I lack even the supplementary skills a good Caster would take pride in, woe is me! However, that does not mean I am without use to your organization, my good lady!”

“Oh, so the information packet went through?” Romani asked, interested. “I know we were working on that, but I wasn’t sure if everything important wound up being included instead of just the barebones Arash got when he was summoned.”

“Indeed it did,” said Shakespeare. “I was given all the knowledge I need to understand your august group’s mission. Truly, it is a cause noble and grand, worthy of song and story! Why, I might just write down your adventures myself!”

Da Vinci sighed and rolled her eyes. “Inspect him with Master’s Clairvoyance,” she said patiently. “He was summoned by Chaldea, so his information should be properly recorded for you.”

I glanced at her, and then turned back to Shakespeare, squinting at him with the Master’s Clairvoyance granted to me by Chaldea’s systems, and his skills unfolded in my mind’s eye.

First Folio | When the Curtain Rises, the Applause Shall Be As Ten Thousand Thunders. A B-Rank Noble Phantasm that used illusions and mental attacks to hit at regrets and buried trauma deep inside the target’s mind. It didn’t have much in the way of combat potential since it left the target essentially invulnerable to physical damage until it was all over, but could be very effective as a psychological attack. I made a mental note to be very careful about that, because I didn’t want to imagine what might come out if it was turned anywhere near my direction.

The last thing anyone here needed was to see a recreation of Jack Slash or Bonesaw’s house of horrors. Things were already rough enough. I didn’t need to add *that* to the burdens on their shoulders.

Territory Creation C. A lower than normal rank, as I understood it. Better than nothing, but as Marie might have put it, “a disgrace for a Caster class Servant.” Because he wasn’t a proper Caster in the first place, or at least he didn’t have any skill with magecraft that the title kind of implied. All things considered, this might actually be better than I would have expected of someone like him.

Item Construction — nothing. The skill was only there to say that it should be there, but didn’t exist. Made sense, I guessed. Shakespeare didn’t have any sort of crafting as part of his legend, not in the literal sense, rather than the literary.

The Globe C. It was basically a miniaturized version of his Noble Phantasm. Less powerful, less useful, less versatile, and smaller in scale, but not useless. I could probably come up with a few ways to make use of it, in a pinch.

Self-Preservation B, which looked like it was just another way of saying he was useless in a fight, so don’t send him into one.

Lastly —

I stopped, brow furrowing, and examined that again. No, it turned out, I wasn’t imagining things.

Enchant A. Conceptual endowment. The ability to add functions and effects to items, giving them strength in proportion to the magnitude of the deeds and powers he ascribed to it. The more unique the item and the feats attributed to it were, the greater the effect, up to the equivalent of a C-Rank Noble Phantasm.

“Oh.”

Slowly, a smile started to spread across my face.

Useless? This guy was anything but.

“Onii-chan,” Rika mumbled, “Senpai has a scary look on her face.”

My hand started to reach for my dagger, and then I remembered that I’d left it back in my room. That was okay. I had the better part of a month. There was no rush.

“Say, Shakespeare,” I began slowly, “if I told you what I’ve done with a knife before, what could you do to a knife using your Enchant skill?”

Da Vinci, it seemed, was the first one to catch on. “Oh dear.”

“Wait,” said Rika, “wouldn’t that be the same knife she stabbed a dragon in the brain with? The one Mash used against Jeanne Alter?”

Mash grimaced and I bit my tongue against scolding Rika for reminding her of what she’d used my knife to do. Calling her out in front of everyone wasn’t the way to handle that one.

“Ohohoho!” Shakespeare cackled gleefully. “That sounds like quite the story! My lady, if this knife of yours is as special as it seems, then I could do quite a bit with it! Why, I’m salivating at the very thought!”

“Whatever you’re thinking of, it’ll have to wait,” said Romani, putting his metaphorical foot down firmly. “This isn’t the place for experimenting or item crafting. This is the summoning chamber. Anything other than summoning, you do it elsewhere.”

Da Vinci smiled. “Oh my, Romani. You almost sounded like Director Animosphere, there.”

Romani blanched. “Th-that’s not what I…”

“In any case, he does have a point,” said Da Vinci. She turned to the technician. “*Signor* Meuniere, perhaps you should get back to your normal position, now? I should think we won’t be attempting any more summonings at this time.”

Meuniere startled. “O-oh, yes, of course! I’ll get right back to that!”

He scurried away, skirting around our group as he left. “Excuse me,” he muttered as he passed.

“I’m not that much of a hardass, am I?” Romani mumbled to himself.

Da Vinci ignored him and turned to Shakespeare next. “For now, perhaps you should familiarize yourself with the facilities? Arash and Siegfried” — here, the two so named gave him a friendly wave and a polite nod respectfully — “are only two of the three Servants currently part of our roster, and there are plenty of rooms and workshops set aside that you might find accommodating. It might behoove you to pick one to your liking.”

Shakespeare chuckled. “My dear, I am many things, but a fool is not one of them. I can take a hint when one is slapping me upside the face with a dead fish.”

I grimaced at the mental image.

He turned to Ritsuka with a bow. “For now, Master,” he said with more grandiosity, “with your permission, I shall take my leave of you and find myself just such an accommodation. Should you require it, you need only send for me, and I shall grace you with my presence once more.”

Ritsuka blinked at him. “Um, right,” he said uncertainly. “Sure. Go ahead. I’ll…see you later, I guess?”

“Excellent!” Shakespeare grinned. “Then it is time for me to, as they say, exit, stage left!”

And then he disappeared.

Da Vinci sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose with one hand. Arash apparently found it a lot more amusing.

“Well, he’s certainly a character.”

“I think he and Lady Bradamante will either get along well,” Siegfried added, “or attempt to murder each other.”

A breath hissed out of my nostrils, not quite a snort. I thought, for a moment, of Alec, Regent, and his penchant for melodrama. They weren't exactly the same — Shakespeare was much more flamboyant and boisterous than Alec had tended to be, his tongue seemed far less sharp — and I didn't doubt that the differences would become easier to see the longer things went on, but just in that brief stretch, I'd been able to see the similarities.

That wound was old, though. It had almost four years to heal. It wasn't raw and gaping, it was just a slight twinge of sad nostalgia.

“Hopefully,” said Romani, “things won't get quite that bad. This place is only going to get more hectic the more Servants we start summoning. We don't need deathmatches and grudges forming when we have barely five.”

“Especially once we start getting those Heroic Spirits who have a history with each other,” Da Vinci said with a wry smile. “Can you imagine if we had King Arthur and Sir Mordred here at the same time? We'd probably have our own Battle of Camlann before the week was out.”

“Oh dear,” said Mash. “That doesn't sound good at all.”

“I dunno, that might make things interesting,” Rika grinned. “There's not that much to do around here in our time off. A pitched battle might be fun.”

“Rika...” her brother sighed.

Da Vinci shook her head. “Well, that's a concern for later.”

“Hopefully, never,” said Romani. “If we're lucky, none of the Servants we summon will have any grievances that can't be hashed out by a couple rounds in the simulator.”

“Of course, you realize, you've just tempted fate,” Da Vinci said with a wry smile. “Now that you've done that, it's almost guaranteed to happen.”

Romani sighed, lamenting, “Me and my big mouth.”

“I'll keep my fingers crossed,” Rika promised, grinning, as she displayed her crossed fingers.

Mash leaned over to Ritsuka and quietly asked, “Does that actually work, Senpai?”

“I wonder,” Ritsuka replied with an awkward chuckle.

“Yeah, yeah, let's all gang up on Romani.” Romani shook his head. “Anyway. There's no reason for everyone to hang around here. I've got more work to do —”

“*You've* got more work to do?” Da Vinci arched an eyebrow pointedly.

“*Da Vinci and I* have more work to do,” Romani amended. “I can’t really order you guys to go a few practice rounds in the simulator, especially since we’re still working out the kinks to let Servants take part, which automatically leaves Mash on the sidelines. Having said that, Ritsuka, Rika, you two in particular have a lot of catching up to do, and Taylor, there’s no reason not to keep your aim sharp, so maybe you three should get a few rounds in yourselves.”

The twins grimaced, sharing a look of horror, like they’d just been asked to wrangle a particularly venomous snake.

“Um...” said Rika.

“Yeah, I guess we could do something like that,” Ritsuka picked up for her.

“But, see, Onii-chan and I are really allergic to getting swarmed by bugs,” Rika finished. “Like, really, deathly allergic. Have been ever since we were born.”

I snorted and had to fight down a grin.

“What?” Romani asked, bewildered.

“We’ve seen how Senpai fights,” said Ritsuka. “Those bugs might not have been much use against Servants in France, or the wyverns, now that I think about it.”

“Be fair, Onii-chan,” Rika admonished him. “Our piddly Gandr probably wouldn’t have done more than tickle them, either.”

Ritsuka nodded. “Right. Fair point.”

“But we’re squishy humans,” Rika said. “Just thinking about Senpai letting loose her Biblical plague is gonna give me nightmares. And that’s before she brings out her knife.”

Ritsuka’s hand went to his eye. Rika nodded. “Right,” she went on. “I don’t want to get a lobotomy, either.”

“They’re not even real bugs!” Romani blurted out, throwing up his hands. “Or a real knife!”

“I’m sure my simulated feelings can tell the difference,” Rika said brightly.

Da Vinci burst into laughter as Romani sagged, pinching the bridge of his nose. She didn’t seem like she was going to be throwing him a metaphorical life preserver anytime soon.

“Would it help,” I began delicately, “if I promised to stick to nothing but Gandr?”

The twins shared another look and eyed me suspiciously, like they were looking for some sign of trickery or deception. There wasn’t any. I was making an honest offer to give them a handicap, because them learning proper aim and the limit of how many times they could fire their Gandr in succession — and then how to safely push those limits — was going to be important going forward.

I hadn’t forgotten that shot that went wide when we were trying to hold off that Shadow Assassin.

“I...guess we can give it a try,” Ritsuka started slowly.

“But only if Senpai promises no bugs,” Rika added quickly. “And no knives, either! And...and Gandr only!”

I smiled. “No bugs, no knives, nothing but my own Gandr.”

For the first couple of practice bouts, at least. Later on, once they had some more experience under their belts, I would have to see about adding my puppets into the mix. I wanted to test out whether or not I could use them better, now that I had my powers back in at least some form or fashion.

The twins shared one more look and nodded to each other.

“Deal,” they said.

Time to whip these kids into shape, it seemed.

I turned to Mash. “Mash, do you think you could get them ready and set up the parameters for the simulator? There’s something I need to talk with Romani about. I’ll be there with you in a minute.”

Mash blinked, and then nodded. “Right! Leave it to me.”

Together with the twins, she left, leading them off to the simulator.

“We’re going to get our asses whooped!” Rika proclaimed cheerfully on their way out.

“As long as it’s just her Gandr, I can live with that,” Ritsuka grouched.

“Well,” said Da Vinci, “I suppose I should get back to work, as well. There is still quite the workload for me to tackle, and even a genius such as myself can only do so many things at once!”

“You don’t *have* to go,” I told her, “but this is really something for Romani to deal with, so it doesn’t strictly concern you, either.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Oh, but now you’ve made me curious.”

A sigh hissed out of my nostrils.

“What’s the problem, Taylor?” Romani asked.

I grimaced and tried to think of a way to broach the subject delicately...but there really wasn’t a way to do that, was there? So maybe being direct and upfront was the best way to handle it to begin with.

“Mash...made her first kill.”

Romani froze, stricken. It wasn’t lost on me then that Romani was probably the closest thing she had to a father, although what that even meant when so much of her backstory had never been told to me, I couldn’t have said. Whatever the exact nature of their relationship, it was obvious to anyone with eyes that he cared about her very much.

“Who...” he choked out, but he couldn’t even get the whole thing past his lips before he was changing tacks. “You were supposed to protect them! You’re their leader! You’re the more experienced one, you’re supposed to handle the tough decisions until they’re ready —”

“I can’t kill Servants, Romani!” I cut him off harshly.

And he recoiled as though I’d slapped him, then immediately deflated, slumping in on himself like the air being let out of a balloon.

“You’re right,” he said somberly. “It’s not fair of me to pile all of that on you. I’m sorry.”

A gusty sigh passed my lips, and I carded a hand through my hair.

“It was Jeanne Alter,” I explained quietly. “She killed Mozart. Jeanne couldn’t get close enough safely enough. Georgios, Arash, and Siegfried were outside handling the wyverns, and Emiya was trying to deal with the Caster who made the wish that created the Dragon Witch in the first place. Mash was the only one left strong, fast, and durable enough to do it.”

“And you were down to just a single command spell, then,” he mumbled.

“A nasty business, all around,” Da Vinci lamented.

Romani looked up and met my eyes. There was something in his that I could quite place. Regret, maybe? Disappointment? Frustration? I couldn’t pin it down for the life of me. Whatever was stewing inside that head of his, he looked suddenly exhausted.

“How did she take it?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. What was a “good” way of handling your first kill? I was sure the various militaries around the world probably had equally diverse ways of addressing the psychology behind taking another person’s life, but strictly speaking, neither the Wards nor the Protectorate was military. The PRT was really more like a police force, too, which generally meant mandated therapy and a psychological evaluation whenever lethal force got involved.

When it functioned right, anyway. In Brockton Bay, you probably got a pat on the back, a cold beer, and a “see you tomorrow,” because things had just been that much of a mess.

I didn’t need to know any of that to know that the way I’d reacted to pulling the trigger on Coil wasn’t “good” at all. But there’d been such a leadup to the whole situation and a whole trail of unusual circumstances that I didn’t really know if you could call it strictly “bad,” either.

The whole thing was fucked up.

“Better than she could have,” I settled on. Deliberately, I didn’t add the second half: *worse than we might have hoped*. The very last thing any of us wanted was for Mash to brush off killing someone without batting an eye.

“You think she needs counseling,” Da Vinci said shrewdly.

She got to the heart of the matter, as expected.

“Yes,” I replied bluntly. “And I think I’m the last person who should try giving it. For a load of reasons, not the least of which being that I’m not qualified.”

Romani sighed and rubbed furiously at his head. “Unfortunately,” he said, frustration bleeding into his voice, “I’m so busy trying to keep this whole organization from falling to pieces that I’m not sure if or when I’ll even have *time* to do my regular job. I’ve been working double shifts just trying to catch up with *last* week’s to-do list, which means I’m already behind on *this* week’s.”

“He really has been,” Da Vinci added helpfully. “Why, he’s even been skipping sleep and relying on chemical stimulants to keep himself going. Isn’t he just so dedicated?”

She lanced him with a pointed glare. The sarcasm dripping from her voice was almost physical.

“I don’t just have psychiatric training, I’m a full blown physician, too,” Romani grumbled. “Nothing I’m taking has any unmanageable long term side effects.”

Somehow, I didn’t think his definition of “unmanageable side effects” was the same as Da Vinci’s.

“Maybe not. But your reliance on them and their overuse will have an eventual and inevitable adverse effect on your performance, Romani. They’re no replacement for proper rest, which *as a physician*, you should know your body needs to replenish and repair itself.”

“As long as I’m careful, it should be fine. I know my limits.”

Déjà vu. This sounded like an argument I’d once heard Defiant and Dragon having.

“I get that you’re busy, Romani,” I cut in before their argument could really get going, “but this is important enough that you really should take the time to sit down with her. Not just so that she doesn’t choke in the next Singularity if she’s faced with another situation where she has to make that sort of life and death decision, but if you care about her well-being, too.”

Romani frowned and looked guiltily down at his tablet. No doubt, it had a list of things that needed to be dealt with that was at least ten pages long, and it was probably just going to keep getting longer over the course of the next few weeks. I didn’t envy him, but while I could lead a field team and write up after action reports, I really wasn’t qualified for handling the day to day managing of an organization like this.

Neither, as it was becoming clearer and clearer to me all the time, was Romani. Better qualified than me, undoubtedly. He’d been here for years before I was dropped on their metaphorical doorstep. He’d had plenty of time to get a handle on how the whole thing functioned. But he’d never been calling the big shots until he was suddenly the most qualified man for the job.

“Romani,” Da Vinci said gently, “we can afford to delay tackling the next Singularity by a week or two. Mash is more important than keeping to a strict schedule for the Rayshift.”

He sighed. The hand holding his tablet drooped bonelessly at his side.

“You’re right,” he said. “I might be the Acting Director of Chaldea until Director Animusphere can be reincorporated, but before that, I’m the head of Medical, and Mash is my patient. I can afford to put off some of this other stuff to make sure she’s okay.”

“You could also stand to delegate some of it,” Da Vinci pointed out.

He gave her a tired, wry smile. “What’s this? The only person in Chaldea more overworked than me is suggesting that I hand off some of my responsibilities?”

“Only one of us is a Servant,” Da Vinci said sardonically. “I don’t need sleep. *You* do.”

He sighed again. “Yeah, yeah, I hear you. I’ll clear some time to catch a few hours of sleep, if it’ll make you happy.”

“Happy isn’t quite the word I would use, but if it gets you into bed, I won’t protest.”

“After,” he added, “I set up a schedule for Mash’s therapy sessions.”

Da Vinci’s brow furrowed, and then she shook her head and threw up her hands. “You know what? I think that’s the best I’m going to get. I’ll take it.”

Quiet as I could, I snuck out of the summoning chamber and left them to bicker.