Chapter 58: Premeditated Scars

I do not own Fate/Stay Night and stuffs.

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They waited.

Not a single one of them left the living room as they watched the meeting with the Apostle Ancestor take place.

Not a single one of them left as the monster left them with a disaster that they could only scramble to pick up the pieces.

And now they awaited for Shirou’s return.

They didn’t have to for long before Saber jumped through the bounded fields of the Emiya property and land in the back yard with a body in her arms. Roughly a third of the barriers would have to be remade from scratch later. It would have been more had the Servant not been keyed into the property.

“Caster.” Luvia ordered, though it was unnecessary. Her Servant had been moving before Saber had even arrived.

“Issei.” Sakura swallowed heavily, seeing her classmate’s literal heartless body from a distance before turning to Rin. “Do you think…”

“I don’t know.” Her older sister cut her off tersely. “You saw it too. That asshole didn’t just rip out Issei’s heart. He tossed him over his shoulder into the winter sea like he was trash.”

She didn’t need to remind them that the vampire had “tossed” Issei with enough force to launch the boy’s body an additional hundred meters away from shore, further complicating matters.

And that didn’t take into account the possibility that Fina had done something to Issei before the traumatizing reveal in the first place.

Avalon was an EX level Noble Phantasm, and indeed considered “bullshit” by many there, but no one was certain just where its limit was drawn. Everyone was fairly certain that it couldn’t regenerate a crushed skull and brain, but the range of severe injuries between “obliterated heart and chest cavity” and “crushed skull” was surprisingly wide.

Hypothermia. Infections. Potential Apostle level curses. Severe blood loss. Ripped out heart. They didn’t know if there was any brain damage, but the list wasn’t comforting.

“Well, the way I see it, if that scabbard of Saber’s was unable to do anything by this point, I’m not sure there’s much that could help the poor kid now outside of a True Magic or somehow transplanting Berserker’s Noble Phantasm on him.” Lancer shrugged, clearly trying to lighten the mood but doing a poor job of it.

“Do be more careful with your words Lancer. Otherwise I may be under the assumption that I have wronged you in some way.” Illya remained stoic as she calmly drank some tea. The fact that Heaven’s Feel and Berserker were matters under her supervision was not missed by the others.

“Lancer. Stop pissing everyone off.” Bazett grimaced, clearly uncomfortable.

Cu Chulaiin frowned. “Something wrong, Master?”

The Enforcer reached down and rubbed her legs. “The girls are, reacting.”

“The Banshees.” Luvia’s eyes momentarily widened in surprise, remembering the “gifts” that Bazett received from Merem during the war. “You mean they’re…”

“Crying. Yeah. You can’t hear them, but they’re sending chills down my entire body.” It was akin to having her nerves, bones, and circuits all being used as an antenna to receive the beautiful hushed whimpers and wailings of the two girls in her very soul.

It did not paint a confident outlook for Issei, and no one dared to acknowledge the fact until Caster gave her verdict. If the combined efforts of Avalon, Saber, and Medea of the Shapeless Isle were unable to save Issei, then…

“Speaking of unheard and unseen oversights.” Archer spoke up for the first time since they gathered, leaning against a far wall and keeping his distance from the others. “I find it odd that the third box, Issei, was missed to begin with. As much as I would like to dismiss how much everyone laud’s my other’s abilities, even I am skeptical that he would simply miss something like that.”

“I missed it too.” Sakura grimaced, knowing that her input was not all that convincing. That was until she looked around and noted that everyone else seemed to have conveniently not counted the boxes as well if the looks on their faces was any indication. “Wait, everyone else did?”

“Twice is coincidence, nearly fourteen fold though…” Rider hummed curiously.

“A mystery then.” Rin knew that Archer was trying to distract them, but she did not have it in her to call him out on it. More so when she needed something to focus on herself.

“A peculiar one no doubt.” Illya agreed. “None of us missed the containers when they arrived, but it appears their exact number were shrouded from us until that boy Issei, the final captive, was revealed. An imposed ambiguity that was strong enough to get past even Caster, at least from a distance. It sounds like a childish sort of prank that novices would play around with, but if applied to something like an army or even a small number of soldiers the results would be nauseating.”

“Didn’t he mention something about being happy about not being a magus?” Sakura tried to grab onto any information from the meeting that might be helpful. “He could be like Shirou. Using basic or irregular pre-established thaumaturgy in his own unique way.”

Rin made a face. “Please word that a little differently next time Sakura. The last thing we need is another Shirou running around the place. Two is enough.”

Lancer snorted and gave Archer a knowing look.

Archer retorted with a helpless sigh and lifted up his hands in surrender, not even bothering to defend himself.

He didn’t even consider bringing up Saber’s bizarre situation in the bigger world of Servants. That was a whole different sort of headache all together.

“She has a point. I doubt anyone expected a pirate vampire to use basic thaumaturgy like that to hide how many people he kidnapped.” Luvia got them back on track. “When someone speaks or encounters Apostle Ancestors, one usually anticipates monsters that twist reality to frankly unnecessary extents by existing, or cunning ancient figures whose plays twist the entire playing field once exposed. Petty tricks like this, it’s insulting and disappointing. The whole performance was utterly pointless.”

“Monsters come in all sorts packages. Apostle or not.” Archer shrugged.

“You would know.” Lancer quipped.

“Lancer.” Bazett warned.

“No. He’s right. Compared to most other Servants, I’m particularly loaded with petty tricks and gimmicks.” Archer didn’t bother to defend himself. “Then again. Most Assassin class Servants fall in the same boat to one degree or another.”

“What about Caster classes? Don’t they count?” Sakura asked.

“They do, but once their spells start to fly most experienced Servants and Masters get a decent idea what they’re about pretty quickly.” EMIYA shrugged. “Establish a territory. Summon familiars. Make artifacts. Team up with other Servants. Set up massive chain reaction traps and distractions to prevent people from trying to kill you if you can’t hold them off. That’s usually how it goes. As far as I’m concerned, it’s the Casters that can hold their own in a direct fight right off the bat that put me on edge the most.”

“Yes, but how does that apply to Vampires?” Illya but in before another argument could spark from EMIYA’s blunt words.

Archer smiled briefly. “Bazett, you would know better than most here what dealing with older Apostles is like as an Enforcer. Why not you explain?”

The eldest human there grimaced, not liking being put on the spot. “Younger and weaker Vampires, Undead and the like, are still ruled by their instincts. Their hunger. Enough that higher functions they have will almost always be shunted to the side whenever the opportunity presents themselves or their thirst gets too much. It takes decades at bare minimum for vampires that regained their human intellect to get these urges under control. Older Apostles, or ones that were transformed in abnormal circumstances, retain their sentience and rule that instinct to the point that they act just like us.”

“I assume that Onii-chan falls under the abnormal category.” Illya nodded. “I don’t see how that’s relevant though.”

Bazett shook her head. “It has everything to do with the situation. The vast majority of Apostles in full control over themselves that were Magi may as well just be considered heretics that have limited immortality. Their experiences and ordeals make them crueler. Stronger. They possess less inhibitions than the average deprived magus. Rin. Sakura. You two must have already had come to this during your encounter with Louvre and his kin.”

The two sisters shifted uncomfortably as they recalled the incident from nearly three years prior.

“They still keep their pride for the most part, but with their lives on the line, those that manage to survive long enough quickly learn not to disregard the petty small tricks when the situation presents itself.” Bazett concluded. “That said, I do agree that Fina’s display was a bit more, whimsical than the norm. There was no necessity to his actions.”

“He certainly did appear to be putting in an effort to enjoy and express himself for the sake of it.” Luvia agreed. “Most individuals of that stature would only find pleasure in the action of establishing their dominance over their peers or accomplishing what they sought out to do, but that one clearly intended to portray a more, jubilant image. Almost approachable.”

“You will find that most ship captains that took to piracy and similar occupations have similar dispositions. An adventurous charisma not unlike the ruler of a garrison or army platoon that rarely interacts with the country proper.” The party turned to see the King of Rats walk in with a mute disposition. “Had a Servant of those qualifications been summoned, you would no doubt have witnessed something of the like.”

“Where’s Shirou?” Rin asked before anyone else could speak.

“He and my master are arriving soon. Other than addressing Fujimura-sensei and Kizuki-sensei, they had some minor matters to discuss. I admit, part of it was in order to calm Lord Emiya down from what has transpired. I fear his ire has peaked to an almost unmanageable plateau. It is, concerning.”

Pissed to the point that even an inhuman nameless god was worried. That was not a good sign.

“As concerning as Ryuudou’s status is, I must admit I am somewhat confused.” Luvia frowned. “I would understand Shirou’s extreme discontent if Tohsaka, Edelfelt, or Matou were the ones attacked, however the impact of his attack should not be as severe as you are portraying it.”

No one missed the fact that Luvia did not count herself among those that she expected Shirou to go ballistic over, but they didn’t point it out. It wasn’t the time for such minor details.

“At face value, that would be the case, however you have overlooked one critical detail.” The Rat shook his head despondently. “The War was over. The goal, the outcome that Lord Emiya had worked years for and sacrificed so much to achieve was in his hands. He had witnessed and experienced the very peace of mind he had sought firsthand. Ever since that night against Caster, he had finally been able to, to put things in his own perspective, been able to sit and see things clearly from “his hill”.”

Archer frowned and clicked his tongue in annoyance. “So I wasn’t imagining it after all.”

“Wait. Wait wait wait wait. Are you saying that Shirou actually *finished* his Reality Marble?” Rin’s eyes widened in genuine astonishment. She didn’t have to look to know that everyone else had the same expression on as she did.

“We don’t have any concrete evidence, but my master and I highly suspect that is the case. I am surprised you have yet to come to that conclusion earlier, Miss Tohsaka. You were there as well when he made that final hurdle.”

She didn’t know why or how, but she instinctively knew what the Rat was talking about.

*“Ah. So that’s how it is. I really am, an idiot.”*

It was just for a flicker of a moment, but when she sat with him at the top of the steps at Ryudoji Temple after the final battle, just before Shirou passed out from his injuries, the world around him had changed. She hadn’t been sure if her eyes had played tricks on her at the time, but in hindsight…

The Rat continued. “Under normal circumstances, I would remain silent on the matter and allowed Lord Emiya to reveal his development at his leisure, however Fina’s whimsical actions have elevated the severity of the situation to an extent that I doubt even he anticipated.”

“And how’s that?” Lancer frowned, clearly not getting the conclusion that Merem’s left hand had come to.

“It means that Shirou sees Fina a threat to everything he’s built up. A threat to the image, the physical idea that he desires to bask in for as long as he exists.” Kiritsugu’s cold dry voice whispered, piercing the conversation like a cold knife. It was the first time he had spoken to most of them in days, and it probably would have been longer if the situation wasn’t so dire.

“A threat? There has to be more than that, Assassin. By that logic, he’d be treating Barthomelloi the same way.” Lancer counter argued.

“No.” Kiritsugu shook his head briefly. “Barthomelloi is a disgruntled employer that they share history with. A tremulous relationship, but one that can still be managed and negotiated to some extent. That relationship is not undeserved, but she is still a noble. She will aim for him, and only him. That is why she is not treated as a greater issue even if her power is uncontested.

“In contrast, that Pirate antagonized Shirou without cause, reason, or provocation, and will likely do so again, targeting those surrounding him as a jest. Fina will aim for all of you for the sole purpose of agitating Shirou for his own personal amusement whenever he so pleases.”

“Ryuudou-san was an unfortunate casualty of opportunity, but from Shirou’s perspective, it could have been any one of us.” Sakura swallowed heavily. “It could still be any one of us.”

“Onii-chan… won’t like that.” Illya nodded, understanding exactly what Kiritsugu was getting at. “He *really* won’t like that.”

“Shit. He’s really going to try and kill Fina.” Bazett paled, coming to the worst, and most likely conclusion given the circumstances. If there was one thing that they could count on Shirou to have in extreme situations like this, it was tunnel vision. A hyper pinpoint focus that allowed him to bear through Zouken’s machinations, the Clocktower, and the war. It was what enabled him to survive as long as he had.

One of his greatest strengths, and crippling weaknesses.

“Of all the times to finally be on the same page as Barthomelloi.” The King of Rats laughed bitterly, not unaware of the irony of his statement.

“We just overcame a farce of a war and he’s going to start another one?!” Luvia gaped, her complexion falling just as fast as everyone else’s.

“He wouldn’t drag us into a war with Apostles.” Sakura cut in. “He’d try and do it all by himself and keep us all out of it if he thought he could pull it off.”

“You do remember he kinda just threatened to rope us into an all-out war with one of the head Vampires less than an hour ago.” Lancer pointed out factually.

“… That was to stay Altrouge Brunstud’s hand.” Rin slowly tried to make sense of the situation and where things were leading. “But knowing Shirou, setting up an armistice with her and killing that pirate would be two completely different matters. He’d still try and find a way to do it behind everyone’s backs.”

“Couldn’t we just have this Altrouge force the pirate to not piss off Onii-chan during negotiations?” Illya suggested.

“We could, but I don’t know how well that would hold up. We’re dealing with Apostles.” Bazett sighed in defeat. “Just like how the armistice and Fina are two separate matters for Shirou, Altrouge could treat it the same way as a loophole. She might even encourage it if she found out, just to see what would happen, though in a way where it would just be between those two without outside interference.”

“Don’t give Emiya any ideas. He might actually go with that setup if he thought he could win.” Luvia shivered at the prospect. Shirou had already shown that he was quite partial to Ath n’Gabla to force enemies to move as he wanted, and she doubted that he would stop using it in the future if the situation called for it.

“I’m afraid she may be more inclined to do just that out of principle.” The King of Rats solemnly added. “Altrouge knows much of the White Wing and his forces. Not everything, but enough. The same cannot be said for Lord Emiya and your Servants.”

“So the most likely scenario we’re looking at is a potential war with one Apostle Ancestor instead of half a dozen. And company. While the rest of the world is actively paying attention to us. Lovely.” Rin groaned. “I thought the whole point of the meeting was to prevent something like this happening.”

“Officially, it still might. What Fina did could be considered preemptive foreplay. Meaningless tomfoolery in the eyes of most Apostles. It will likely be excused as an unfortunate accident seeing as Lord Emiya’s status was not known at the time of the kidnapping. Even afterwards, I’m afraid that the life of your friend won’t be comparable to the armistice struck between the two parties by most of our peers.” The King of Rats relented. “Once the final agreement is struck and known however, you can be assured that many will eye your relationship with Altrouge’s brood with a keener gaze.”

“But would Shirou believe it would stick?” Sakura brought up the glaring question that mattered the most.

“Probably not. I don’t.” Illya hummed as if it wasn’t her problem. Kiritsugu nodded shallowly, agreeing with his daughter. “And if he doesn’t, he’s likely to waste time planning the first strike so he’s not put on the defensive.”

“He’s probably doing it now for all we know.” Lancer lazily waved his hand, only to pause as everyone else in the room began to pale and make faces. “… Oi. I was joking.”

“My god he is planning on assassinating an Apostle Ancestor as we speak.” Luvia muttered as if coming to terms with a cold reality that she didn’t want to believe was true, clearly not going in the direction Lancer intended. Her head whipped around to the others Masters. “We have to stop him.”

“I’m pretty sure Saber won’t mind if we break his arms and legs temporarily so he doesn’t do anything when Fina returns if we explain the situation.” Illya suggested with a completely serious face.

“Won’t work.” Kiritsugu of all people shot her down with an equally grave expression. “Even if we manage to take Avalon from him he can project another and heal himself.”

“You’re right. We’d have to take him out completely. I can put his soul into a doll for a while.”

“We’re not breaking Shirou’s arms and legs! And we’re not taking his soul out of his body either!” Rin snapped, pretending to ignore the slight pang of childish disappointment she felt from Archer. She almost pitied Shirou for the dysfunctional family he’d be stuck with after everything finally settled down.

“I’d put it back.”

“Please be serious about this.” The sad thing was that Rin highly suspected Illya was being serious about messing with his soul.

“Why don’t we just try talking to Shirou first before deciding to do something ridiculous?” Sakura asked carefully. “Even if we can’t get him to change his mind, we could at least manage to prevent him from getting ahead of himself.”

“Getting ahead of himself…?” Bazett frowned before getting the nuance. “Wait, you want to try and convince him to play the long game against an Apostle?”

“Why not?” She replied before anyone else could cut her off, her innocent question completely at odds with the severity of the situation. “He spent two years with me right under grandfather’s nose biding his time and being careful while simultaneously working at the Clocktower. If Shirou could manage that without anyone being the wiser, then it shouldn’t be impossible to convince him to do it again.”

The room was eerily quiet as her words sunk in.

And then Lancer barked out a laugh and gave Sakura an appraising, yet viciously hungry look. “Heh. And here I thought you were the normal one. Turns out you’re as twisted as the rest.”

“Lancer. I recommend you chose your words more carefully in the future. It is unbecoming to continue to provoke pointless battles even after death.” Rider’s cool voice chilled the air in the room.

“Cool it. All of you.” Rin cut them off before turning to Sakura. “Do you really think that would work? I know Shirou’s done some impressive and insane things to prepare for the War, but do you genuinely believe we could convince him to play the long game with this with what’s at stake? Because I am going to be honest, I don’t know if he’s in a state where he’d be able to even hear us right now. You’ve seen what he’s like when he gets pissed Sakura. It’s like trying to talk with a brick wall. That shoots swords.”

“You have to cut him off early and steer him in another direction.” Assassin rasped, getting a slew of confused looks in the process. “It’s how I turned him away from Archer’s path.”

“… He’s still a reckless idiot.” Archer huffed, indirectly admitting that Kiritsugu did manage to do what he claimed.

The eldest Emiya there almost smiled for a brief moment. “Never said I tamed the bull. Just aimed it in a different direction. I wasn’t the one that put it in the china shop in the first place.”

“Tsk.”

“He’ll listen if he thinks that not doing it will put us in danger.” Sakura reasoned. “Once we get him to sit down, we should be able to reason with him. Eventually.”

“For our sakes, do try to sound more confident when the time comes, Matou.” Luvia sighed, already losing faith in their new plan of action.

Rider looked like she was about to say something when she turned her head towards the entrance of the house.

As did Lancer, Archer, Assassin, and the King of Rats.

“Better muster up that courage quick then.” Archer muttered as the front door opened.

A subtle chill went up their spines.

Lancer whistled, impressed with the raw desire to murder that flooded the house. It felt less like something a human could possibly produce, and more like a genuine malicious curse radiating from an object being brought into the premises. “Well what do you know? Turns out there’s a few people in this soft era that know how to get proper pissed after all.”

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