

## Chapter CXIV: A Cinematic Experience

Over the course of the next week, it became increasingly obvious that bringing Emiya back had not miraculously solved all of Rika's problems. Before, she'd treated him with an easy camaraderie, teasing him, making jokes at his expense (that rarely failed to get a smile from him, too), and generally just acting as though he'd been a part of our group since the beginning — and in a very real sense, he had. She had just warmed up to him faster than anyone else in Chaldea.

But in the days after we brought him back, there was a distance between them that hadn't existed before. Fewer jokes, fewer smiles, less teasing on the overall. She had trouble even *looking* at him, and maybe it wouldn't have been a problem if he'd come back with all of his memories intact and maybe it would still have been a problem even then, but the reality of the situation was that she had erected a wall, and I wasn't the only one who noticed.

"I was hoping it was just going to be a temporary thing," Emiya confessed to me when I pressed him about it. "A little awkwardness, you know? After all, it's not every day that someone comes back from the dead. Even Servants usually don't have memories of their previous summonings, not unless something happened that sticks with them even back to the Throne."

My lips pursed, and I chanced a glance over my shoulder, but this early in the day, there was only one other person in the cafeteria for breakfast, and he was all the way across the room, blissfully ignorant of our conversation.

Under different circumstances, I might have let it be for a while longer. Left it up to the professionals to deal with. Working through her problems was something Rika really should be doing with a therapist, someone who was trained to deal with them and help her, someone who could teach her how to cope and how to move past them. The only thing resembling that sort of training that I really had was my own sessions with Doctor Yamada.

But Chaldea was in bad straits. Everyone was pulling double, triple, or even quadruple duty, just to keep the place running, and one of those people also happened to be the only one left who *did* have the training to be a therapist.

In these circumstances, keeping my nose out of things just wasn't a feasible option. For that matter, I was already involved, wasn't I? I'd already given Rika my metaphorical shoulder to cry on in the aftermath of losing Emiya, so there was no reason not to insert myself further now in the name of getting this mess resolved.

We could leave the question about exactly why and how much he remembered about his previous summonings for another day. This was more important.

"I know you don't remember what happened past that call," I began, "but you've at least been told how everything shook out, right?"

If Rika got angry at me later for interfering, then it couldn't be helped. I wasn't going to let strained team dynamics put anyone's lives at risk — especially when it would definitely make Rika feel twice as guilty.

“I’ve been briefed on it, yeah,” he said. All the while, he slowly dished up a breakfast tray for me, dragging his metaphorical feet as much as possible. “I fought Herakles, right? And died holding him off while the rest of you tried to take the Grail from Jason.” One side of his mouth hiked up. “Only three lives, this time. I must be losing my touch.”

‘Only three lives,’ he said, as though he’d been expecting to take more. I guess, when he could replicate Noble Phantasms the way he did, maybe that wasn’t as farfetched as it sounded.

“Rika took it hard,” I told him. His smirk fell. “She blamed herself for you dying. She thinks it’s her fault you didn’t last long enough for us to take the Grail and bring you back before Herakles could finish you off. Because she’s the one who ordered you to hold him off as long as possible.”

His brow furrowed. “Is that so?”

“She’s afraid you blame her for getting you killed. She thinks that if she was a better Master, you could’ve made it out of that alive and well.”

He clicked his tongue. “That’s ridiculous. Herakles is one of the greatest heroes to ever live. He’s a measuring stick for a lot of other Heroic Spirits, and most of them don’t even come close. I already knew going into that fight that I probably wasn’t going to be coming back from it. It was a bad situation all around — there’s no way I could blame her for making the only call she really had. A better Master would’ve made the exact same decision.”

Well, considering the whole thing had been my plan from the beginning... Yeah, I couldn’t really refute that, could I?

“Have you told *her* that?” I asked pointedly. The look on his face told me that he hadn’t. “You should. I can tell her the same thing as many times as I want, but it won’t mean as much coming from me.”

If she believed me at all. Our little talk out on the pier seemed to have helped her with some of her insecurities, but the hit of realizing that our Servants would never come back from death completely intact had battered them since then. I couldn’t fix that. Neither could any of our other Servants, because none of the rest of them had been killed and needed to be summoned back. We’d only lost their diminished shadows, the ones that returned to the main body here in Chaldea the same way defeated Servants did to the Throne.

The only one who could truly convince her that there were no hard feelings was Emiya.

“I’m not sure you give yourself enough credit, there.” He sighed. “But you’re probably right that this isn’t something someone else can handle for me. If there’s a problem between me and my Master, then it’s up to me to fix it, isn’t it.”

“You certainly can’t leave it to Jeanne Alter,” I told him.

Emiya chuckled and shook his head. “I’m not even sure what her solution might be, but it would probably be needlessly violent.”

Maybe, but maybe not. It wasn't like Aífe was reporting to me every day about what sort of things Jeanne Alter got up to under her watch, but the very fact that she *hadn't* come to me and told me about Jeanne Alter acting out said quite a bit about how she was actually behaving. And she'd been remarkably helpful during the fight against Herakles and Forneus, too, which spoke just as well of her character.

"Probably."

Of course, her solution to Rika's problem would still probably involve convincing Rika to let her beat up on Emiya until everything was resolved or else copious amounts of property damage to our gym to let Rika work out her frustrations. Neither was an acceptable outcome.

"Whatever you're planning to do to fix things with Rika, don't put it off for too long," I warned him. "This isn't the sort of thing we can afford to let fester. The sooner the two of you get squared away, the better."

"If that's an official order from the team leader, then I guess I don't have much choice," he drawled. Apparently done dishing me up, he slid my tray a few inches in my direction. "I might have to ask Marcus to cover for me again, but I'll find a moment to talk things out with Rika. You're right that I can't afford to let it sit for too long."

I accepted my tray and picked it up. As usual, everything on it, no matter how simple, looked positively delicious. "You might have your chance later tonight. We've finally got everything arranged to have that movie night Rika's wanted for the last week, so somewhere in all of that, you might be able to corner her for a talk."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said without committing to anything at all. "Enjoy your breakfast."

"Thanks."

I took it for what it was and let that be the end of the conversation, ferrying my tray to an empty table so I could sit down to eat. As expected, the food was just as good as it looked, and I allowed myself a small moment of indulgence to relish the fact that Emiya was back among us and his gourmet meals were back on the menu.

Like I've said so many times before. Screwed. And the brief two days we'd spent without him to cook for us had proved me right.

Because I'd gotten there so early, I was done with my breakfast long before anyone else really filtered into the cafeteria. By the time the twins and Mash made their way in, fresh off a shower after their morning workout with Aífe, I must've been sitting there for half an hour, letting my food digest and thinking vaguely about half a dozen different things that I was going to need to take care of at some point in the future.

Like the fact I still hadn't gotten a final word from Da Vinci about my terrarium. Or the spider puppet. Presumably, the fact that she hadn't said anything to me about either meant that neither was ready for one reason or another, although considering how many hats she was wearing these days, I might need to go and remind her.

It was easy for stuff to fall by the wayside when you were quite literally one of the only things keeping Chaldea running at all, let alone so smoothly.

I watched carefully as they all made their way up to Emiya to get served, keeping my eye on Rika in particular. Mash and Ritsuka didn't act anything like out of the ordinary, but the smile Rika plastered on her face and the half-hearted joke she must have told that got an equally half-hearted grin out of Emiya had to have been painfully weak.

Just like she'd been for the rest of the last week. If they didn't get that resolved soon, I might have to step in a little more directly than just giving Emiya a little push.

And as she turned away from him, her tray in hand, the awkwardness and tension just *bled* out of her like sand through a sieve, leaving behind only a slight slump to her shoulders as the three of them meandered my way.

"Ugh," Rika said as she plopped down into a seat at my table. Her tray thudded solidly as it hit the tabletop. "It never feels like it gets any easier. Why does it never feel like it gets any easier?"

"Because she's always adjusting it," her brother told her tiredly.

Rika, halfway through cutting up an absolutely decadent blueberry pancake, stopped cold. "She is?"

Ritsuka gave her a skeptical look. "You mean you really didn't notice? Every time we start to get used to it, she'll add a set of reps or another lap or two."

"That bitch," Rika said faintly.

"Senpai!" Mash scolded her sternly.

"She's really been making it harder this whole time?" Rika asked her brother, ignoring Mash.

"How did you not notice?" was his incredulous reply.

"Because I'm too focused on not passing out in the middle to think about how many laps we do each day!"

"It's not going to be forever," I told her, jumping into the conversation. "Once she gets you to a baseline she's comfortable with, then she'll ease up and focus on maintaining your fitness instead of building it up."

"You mean I'm going to have to keep suffering like this for who knows how long?" Rika whined.

"Not too much longer," I said. "You two were already in pretty decent shape for your age before this whole thing started, and you've been training with Aífe almost every day for about two and a half months. Another couple of weeks will probably get you to where she wants you to be."

"Weeks?" Rika squeaked. Even Ritsuka looked a little paler than he'd been a minute ago.

I raised an eyebrow at them. “Considering most professional athletes train for *years* to get themselves into the kind of shape they need...”

It was frankly incredible how far along they’d come as quickly as they had. Neither of them had been couch potatoes by any stretch of the imagination, but daily physical education courses at school only did so much for your fitness. The fact that Aife was a professional teacher with a supernatural knack for training students was probably half the reason they were coming along as quickly as they were.

“And we don’t have years,” Ritsuka concluded wearily. “We have to finish fixing all of these Singularities...in a little under fourteen months.”

Arash plopped down into the chair next to me. “Well, you’re making pretty good time on that front. Already halfway done, and it hasn’t even been six months yet, right?”

I glanced his way, but didn’t comment. I hadn’t noticed him come in, so either he’d materialized in the corner somewhere out of sight and made his way over, or he’d come in through the other set of doors.

“I guess we have been resolving the Singularities quickly so far, haven’t we?” said Mash thoughtfully. “It’s only been about three and a half months since Singularity F, and yet we’ve already fixed three more in that time.”

They weren’t wrong. Some part of me had been expecting things to take a lot longer, something more on the same timescale as Orléans, which had been about a week of real time and a month inside the Singularity, but both Septem and Okeanos had been a lot faster and handled a lot quicker. Some of that was undoubtedly because we could cover the same sort of distances we’d seen in Orléans with a lot more speed, so we hadn’t spent as much time traveling, but some of it also must have had something to do with the jump in power between them — both for our allies and for our enemies.

“There’s no guarantee that pace will keep up going forward,” I told them. “We still don’t have anything past the next one pinned down beyond their general location, and if we have to face another one of those Demon Gods in every Singularity that’s left...”

Especially if they all wound up being the same size as Forneus. Flauros had been big, but once we adapted to his size and his attack patterns, landing a killing blow hadn’t been particularly hard. If we faced them all out in the open from here on out instead of in a cramped palace, Emiya alone could probably handle each one without too much issue.

But Forneus had proved that they could all be *much* bigger and much harder to kill than Flauros. If Forneus was closer to their standard size, then it was going to be an uphill slog each time.

“Ugh,” said Rika. “Don’t remind me of that. One tentacle monster was bad enough, two was already too much, but four more? I don’t like *ikayaki* enough for that!”

“You don’t like it at all,” Ritsuka pointed out.

“Exactly! So the world needs to stop trying to make me into a cliché! Or an h-anime protagonist! Next thing you know, we’ll be fighting orcs in loincloths, and I just don’t know if I can handle that!”

“H-anime protagonist?” Mash asked curiously. “Orcs in loincloths?”

“It’s nothing,” Ritsuka rushed to say, cheeks faintly red as he hid his face behind a hand. “Don’t worry about it, Mash. Rika’s just being melodramatic.”

And that reaction told me all I needed to know about exactly what Rika was referencing.

“I have a legitimate concern!” Rika insisted. “Those things are so gross, and I really don’t want to even imagine how much worse they can get!” She gave an exaggerated shudder. “So many eyes!”

“Can we not?” Ritsuka asked her. “I’m trying to eat, Rika!”

She stuck her tongue out at him petulantly, but turned back around to her own breakfast and dug back in rather than press the issue. Thankfully.

“In any case,” I began, “you two aren’t training to be Olympic athletes. Things will ease up for you soon enough.”

“*Tomorrow* isn’t soon enough,” Rika grumbled into a mouthful of pancakes.

My mouth twitched. “If it makes you feel any better, the arrangements are all in place for your movie night. Unless you want to reschedule, we could all sit down after dinner and watch... *Titanic* is what everyone agreed on, right?”

Rika’s head shot up. “What? No way! Everything’s ready?”

“Everything’s ready,” I confirmed. “Of course, if you’re feeling too tired to stay up and watch a movie tonight, then there’s no reason we can’t postpone —”

“Screw that!” she interrupted. “I’ve been waiting all week! There’s no way I’m gonna put it off for later!”

And just like that, I’d gotten her mind off of giant tentacle monsters and the training of her harsh taskmaster.

“I’m sure everyone else will be excited, too,” said Mash.

“I know I am,” said Arash. “It’s one thing to get the information on what movies are and how they work from the FATE System, actually watching one has to be a whole lot better.”

Rika’s head bobbed as she nodded. A huge smile stretched across her face. “For sure! Oh man, you guys have no idea what you’ve been missing! Not just *Titanic*, we’ve gotta find other stuff to watch, too!”

“*Godzilla*, maybe?” Ritsuka suggested slyly.

“Which one?” his sister asked. “The new one, the one from the 90s, the OG from way back when? Oh! Maybe the animated one?”

“They made that many movies by the same name?” Mash asked, sounding somewhere between awe and disbelief.

The twins shared a look. “I mean,” Rika began, “he’s a cultural icon, Cinnabon. Of course they made a whole bunch of movies about him.”

“Some of them better than others,” Ritsuka added dryly.

“Up from the depths,” Rika sang quietly, and the tune tickled at something in the back of my head, long forgotten from childhood, “thirty stories high...”

Her brother reached out to poke her in the side, but she wiggled around it, grinning at him.

“That one doesn’t count,” he said. “That’s a cartoon series, not a movie.”

“Still Godzilla, Onii-chan,” she replied smugly. “Officially licensed and everything.”

Ritsuka had no rebuttal for that, apparently, or if he did, he let it slide.

“We’ll have to see what everyone else is interested in after the first one,” Arash stepped in gently. “For tonight, though, I can go let the others know the plan. That sound good to you, Rika?”

“You bet!” said Rika.

“Everything’s set up in the briefing room,” I told them. “I think...about an hour after dinner should give us all plenty of time to get there and get settled in. If there are no objections?”

“None,” said Ritsuka.

“Sounds good to me!” Rika agreed.

“No objections,” said Mash. “I’m looking forward to watching a movie with everyone!”

I looked over to Arash and nodded. “There you go.”

“I’ll let the others know where and when,” he said, and then he stood and gave us a jaunty wave. “See you then!”

“See you then,” echoed Ritsuka at the same time as his sister said, “Later!”

Arash took a step back, and then he vanished. It was a good thing Marie wasn’t there right then, because she would have had a few choice words about it, but the fact she wasn’t was probably why Arash felt safe enough to do it in the first place.

“You’re supposed to eat popcorn while you watch a movie, right?” Mash thought aloud. “I wonder if Emiya would be able to make us some?”

Rika’s smile became instantly fragile, and her brother, who knew her well enough that he had no doubt picked up on the tension between her and Emiya, winced.

“M-maybe he would!” she said. “W...we’ll have to ask him!”

“Y-yeah...” Ritsuka agreed awkwardly.

Unfortunately, Mash’s innocent question put a bit of a damper on the mood, and the rest of breakfast passed in relative quiet by comparison. Some stilted conversation was still made, and Mash seemed to sense that something wasn’t quite right, but also didn’t seem entirely sure what or why, only that it was something she’d said that caused it.

Eventually, our group broke up and went our separate ways for the rest of the morning — to relax before our much busier afternoons took up our time and attention. While the twins and Mash went off to do whatever it was they did to pass the time, I made a quick stop at Da Vinci’s workshop to ask her about my terrarium or that spider puppet, but...

“Sorry, I don’t have anything new to tell you on that front,” she said to me. “In between everything else, I haven’t had much time to dedicate to working on it, so I’m afraid it’s fallen a bit by the wayside. As for a terrarium, it’s possible, but you would need to get permission from the Director to find a room, and then her approval for whichever one you decided upon.”

“I see.”

I probably wouldn’t have any trouble on that front. I didn’t think Marie would have any reason to say no, so as long as I could find a room that was large enough and secluded enough, I should be set.

Of course, then it would be a matter of finding bugs to populate it with. I didn’t think Madagascar was in range of any of the Singularities we were going to be visiting in the future, not as far as we knew right now, so I might have to settle with something less impressive than my favored Darwin’s Bark Spiders.

Looking up what sort of bugs were native to Britain was probably a good idea, but finding out how much space I was going to have first was a better one.

“I’ll get back to you on that.”

“I’ll be waiting!” she said brightly.

I was halfway out the door before I remembered to ask, “Is there anything new on the next Singularity?”

“We’re still working on that,” she told me apologetically. “We’ve narrowed the source of the divergence down to southern England, and the level of deviance suggests that it’s closer to modern day than the Septem or Orléans Singularities, but it’s going to be some time yet before we have finer details about what it looks like.”

And so there was nothing for me to study right then, because southern England between the fifteenth century and now was still about six hundred years of history to cover and several thousand square miles at a minimum. Too much breadth to get any kind of depth without years of study, and anything I might try now had a very real possibility of being entirely useless.



“I see.”

There was nothing else I needed to go over with her just then, so I bade her goodbye and left to go and sit down with another novel for now. I remembered hearing that was part of being in the military. “Hurry up and wait.” Yeah. I’d had a decent few experiences with that as part of the Wards, too. There just wasn’t anything I could do about it.

So, without much of anything else to do for the moment, I went back to my room and read until lunchtime, and about an hour after that, once my food had settled enough, it was time for Mash’s next swimming lesson.

Predictably, a certain ball of fur had decided to tag along again, oversized lifeguard jersey and all.

“Is he going to sit in on all of your lessons?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking.

“Fou?” Mash looked over at him curiously. “I…think he might. I’m not sure if he has anything else to do, right now.”

My lips thinned, but I didn’t press the issue. He’d been there for every other one of her lessons so far, and it didn’t look like he intended to stop attending. For all that he’d warmed up to the twins with remarkable speed, Mash still seemed to be his favorite person in Chaldea.

“Alright,” Marie said imperiously, and I had to look away from Fou as the lesson started. “Before we start anything new, let’s review what you’ve learned so far!”

“Yes!” Mash agreed enthusiastically.

She’d picked up treading water fairly quickly, and proved that she had a solid enough grasp on it that the rest was time and practice, so now we were going to move onto the more complicated parts. I remembered learning the breaststroke — figuring out the timing on when to take a breath had been the hardest part.

Nonetheless, Mash gave it her all, and what she lacked in skill, she made up for in enthusiasm. She gave it her all the entire way, as I’d come to expect of her, and although there was no way she was going to master *this* in a single afternoon either, you wouldn’t have known it from how hard she tried to. When the alarm rang to let us know we needed to go and get ready for dinner, she was even disappointed that we were done for the day.

“It’s already time to stop?” she asked.

“For today,” I confirmed. “We’ve still got a long way to go, though, so your swimming lessons are nowhere near done.”

“Knowing when to take a break and when to stop for the day is just as important in swimming as it is any other aspect of your life,” Marie added imperiously.

Mash nodded.

“Right! Of course, Director, Miss Taylor!”

We climbed out of the pool and toweled dry, and before she left to go get cleaned up, Mash turned to us, gave us both a slight bow, and just as she had so many times before, said, “Thank you again for teaching me how to swim!”

Fou padded after her — somehow, it never managed to trip on that ridiculous jersey or slip on the wet tile — blowing his whistle to make sure she didn’t leave without him.

I made to follow so I could change and take my own shower to clean off the chlorine, but Marie’s hand found my elbow and stopped me. When I turned back towards her, there was a troubled expression on her face. Her brow was furrowed, and I could see the storm brewing behind her eyes.

“Is something wrong?”

“There’s...something you should know about Mash,” she began ominously.

Slowly, I turned to face her fully. “Something I should know?”

A jolt shot through my stomach. Was I finally going to be let in on some of the secrets regarding what Marisbury Animusphere had done to her?

“I’ve...talked to Romani about her recently,” Marie said, somewhat vaguely. “About what to expect going forward, and what it might mean for the rest of the team. It’s...”

She looked down and away, like she was ashamed, and apprehension gathered in my gut, churning about and spoiling my appetite. For several long seconds, she was silent, like she was mustering her courage for what she had to say. I sensed the blow coming before she delivered it, even if I didn’t quite know what form it was going to take, so I didn’t press her to continue, I just waited until she did.

Finally, Marie looked back up at me, solemn and grim, and ripped off the Band-Aid.

“Mash only has about sixteen months to live.”

And yet, somehow, what she actually said felt like a hammer blow to my stomach.

“What?”

Marie grimaced and looked away again, and like she was talking to the air next to me instead of me myself, she went on, “Because of the things my...th-the previous Director did to her, th-the treatments he did, the...the *experiments* he put her through, and the...the way he made her, Mash’s lifespan was...never expected to match a normal human’s. According to Romani...she’ll live to see eighteen, but not much more than that.”

Despite the warmth of the room, I felt cold. My hands shook, and clenching them didn’t stop it. If I had a swarm in there with me, I had no doubt every single bug in it would have been buzzing.

“What does that mean, exactly?” By some miracle, my voice came out steady and betrayed none of the emotion swirling in my chest like a typhoon.

Marie's lips drew into a thin line. "For now, nothing. She'll... She'll continue like normal as though nothing's wrong. For most of those sixteen months, even. But... When she... When *the time comes*, it'll be... Fast. Sudden. Neurological dysfunction, complex organ failure, musculoskeletal deterioration —"

"She's going to *literally* fall apart."

I wanted to hit something. I wanted to hit something so badly that my fists trembled and the muscles in my arm twitched and flexed against my will. If Marisbury Animosphere was right there in front of me, I would have laid him out with everything I had, and I wasn't sure I could have stopped myself.

But the only one there with me was Marie, and Marie didn't deserve that. Marie hadn't done anything to deserve that from me, even if she seemed to feel like she did. Even if I were so inclined to punish the daughter for the sins of her father, she was already doing that to herself enough that the realization hit me like a splash of cold water.

"...does Mash know?"

"Not yet," Marie answered. She wrapped her arms around herself. "But..."

Yeah. But.

"She's not stupid. She'll figure it out on her own."

One way or another, likely when her arms and hands started shaking for no apparent reason. Damn it. Would she start having trouble speaking after that? Aphasia, like I had developed during Gold Morning? Dementia and Alzheimer's symptoms? Prosopagnosia, to the point she couldn't even recognize the Masters she cherished so dearly?

"He's putting it off right now...but Romani will likely tell her at some point, too," said Marie.

How cruel. To have to tell the girl who was his daughter in all but name that she was doomed to an early, miserable death, trapped in a failing body as even the simplest of tasks became impossible. Would he make it out of this without breaking himself?

Marisbury Animosphere...how much misery you left behind you. Whatever hell he found himself in was too good for what he deserved.

"There's nothing we can do?"

Marie shrinking in on herself told me the answer clearer than any words she could have used. Fucking... A professional medical doctor, talented mages, and one of the greatest geniuses to ever live, and none of them had a solution to fix the problem of one girl's failing body? We could fucking *time travel*, and *this* was where we reached our limits?

*Fuck.*

“Even if Da Vinci were to make a spare puppet body for her, the way she did me,” Marie said quietly, “the things the...previous director did to Mash are...”

Not something that could be fixed just by repairing her body. Not when the whole point of being a Demi-Servant was to bond a Heroic Spirit to her *soul*.

Damn it.

“The twins...”

Marie’s grimace drew deeper. “Knowing Romani, he’ll tell them himself once we’re closer to the...the *end*. When they might start noticing something’s wrong themselves.”

So that they didn’t have this knowledge hanging over them for the next year. Some of the tension in my shoulders loosened. Yeah. Knowing what was going to happen to her this early might change how they interacted with her, how they treated her, and most importantly, how careful they were about their orders while inside the remaining Singularities. As harsh as it was, treating Mash like glass was the last thing any of us should do while on the job, and if they hesitated at any point because they were worried about how it would affect her in the long term, it could be devastating.

Fucking... Of course. And Mash would appreciate that least of all, especially if it resulted in one of us getting hurt.

“But you decided to tell me now?”

“Because...” Her gaze drifted over to the pool, and instantly, I understood. I took a step closer, leaned in until our foreheads almost touched.

“It’s not your fault,” I told her.

Her head hung. “But it was my father who...!”

“And you’re not your father.” I’d tell her the same thing as many times as necessary. “All things considered? I think that’s a good thing. Because I’m not sure Marisbury Animusphere would have cared, let alone told anyone.”

“He built Chaldea,” she said. “Without him, none of us would be here. I can barely keep it from falling to pieces.”

“Marisbury already had his Team A,” I countered. “He would have let me bleed out so he could use my corpse. *Olga Marie* saved my life. If I had to pick, she’s the one I want for Chaldea’s Director.”

Her mouth wobbled. The sloshing of the pool water and the hum of the filter filled the brief silence.

“I don’t know what to do,” she confessed in a whisper as though it was some terrible secret. “He was my father and a better magus than I could ever hope to be, but...”

But he was a monster who, whatever his intentions, had left a trail of suffering in his wake. He had run inhumane experiments in the hopes of creating a secret weapon, had ruined at least one life in

the pursuit of it, and who knew how many more “failed” test subjects hadn’t even made it this far. Every time I found out something new about him, it was another atrocity he committed in the name of saving the world.

Was that on purpose, Contessa? Were you trying to give me a new perspective on Cauldron, or was I supposed to be looking in the fucking mirror?

“Keep doing what you’ve been doing,” I told her with confidence. “Keep treating Mash like a human being, not an experiment, and whatever else you might be, you’ll be a better person than Marisbury was.”

Marie closed her eyes and drew in a deep, shaky breath. “Is it really that simple?”

Maybe not. But when there wasn’t much else either of us could do for Mash in the first place...

“It has to be.”

It wasn’t a great answer, and Marie had her own doubts about it, I could see them in the expression on her face, but whatever they might have been, she didn’t voice them. I wasn’t sure I would have been able to alleviate them if she had.

“Come on,” I said, trying to change the subject as though my own gut wasn’t still squirming. “Dinner’s soon, and we both still need to get cleaned up.”

She let me lead her out of the room and into the locker room, and although a part of me didn’t want to leave her alone at all after that talk, we had to go our separate ways to shower, dress, and get ready for dinner.

Fuck, my appetite had evaporated. Even once I actually sat down almost an hour later, my tray filled with a platter of Emiya’s finest, I found it hard to stomach actually stuffing any of it in my mouth. The twins and their conversation with Mash — more excited chattering about the movie we were going to be watching, I discovered when I took a second to pay attention — mostly flitted about my head like white noise. By the time I finished, I didn’t think I’d tasted a single bite of it all. It could have been a bland nutrient paste for all of the difference it would have made.

There was no way Arash didn’t notice, but he had the tact to avoid bringing it up in front of everyone else.

I almost begged off even going to the movie with the rest afterwards, but if ever there was a surefire way to arouse the others’ suspicions, that would have been it. So, even if I wasn’t in the mood for it, I let myself be led to the briefing room with Mash and the twins, hanging just far enough at the back of the group not to get pulled into their conversation.

By the time we reached our destination and the door to the briefing room slid open, most of the rest of our Servants had already arrived, waiting for us inside. Aífe, Bradamante, Siegfried, even Jeanne Alter and El-Melloi II were there.

“Hot Pops!” Rika greeted him brightly. “I didn’t think you were gonna show!”

“Don’t get me wrong, *Titanic* isn’t really my sort of movie,” he replied. “At the very least, however, it should be interesting enough to see how the rest of this motley crew reacts to it, so I might as well stick around for that.”

“Getting soft in your old age, you geezer?” Jeanne Alter asked sardonically.

“I’m not that old, you know,” he said, sounding annoyed. “In fact, if we’re talking chronologically, then I’m technically one of the youngest Servants here.”

Jeanne Alter leered. “Whatever you say, *Hot Pops*.”

He scowled.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” said Siegfried, “but would it be too impolite of me to ask what this movie is about? I understand there was something about a ship that sank a hundred years ago, but I wasn’t under the impression we were watching a...documentary, I think is the proper term?”

“It’s not,” said Ritsuka. “It’s more like a ‘based on a true story’ kind of thing, so it’s really more of a...dramatized retelling, I guess you could call it.”

The door whooshed open again. “Don’t forget about the romance,” Emiya said as he strode in, pushing a cart laden with cartons of popcorn. “And the perpetual debate about whether or not Jack could have fit on that slab of wood with Rose.”

A few weeks ago, Rika would have jumped in with some comment about it, but now, she just smiled awkwardly and said, “Yeah...”

“Sir Emiya!” Bradamante said. “You brought food!”

“Someone suggested that it’s not really a movie night without popcorn,” Emiya drawled. He gestured to the cart. “So I prepared enough for everyone.”

“Oh.” A newly familiar head of red hair leaned through the doorway behind Emiya. “Everyone is already here, so...” Over her shoulder, Hippolyta called, “Sam, it looks like this is indeed the right place.”

“Really?” Bellamy came up next to her and peered inside. “I could’ve sworn it was another door or two down the hall, but I guess that’s why I’m not the one leading the way, huh?”

“Indeed.”

“And with those two here,” said Arash as Bellamy and Hippolyta stepped into the room, “that’s everyone who said they wanted to come.”

He looked at me, and the only thing I could really do was say, “Then I guess we might as well get this started. *Titanic* is a long movie, after all.”

He offered me a smile.

“Sounds good.” He turned towards the rest of the room and raised his voice. “Hey, everyone! We’re going to start the movie in a minute here, so why don’t you all grab some popcorn and find a seat?”

There was a moment’s pause, and then all at once, the rest of them formed into a disorganized crowd around Emiya and his cart of popcorn, with a disgruntled Jeanne Alter forced to wait behind the twins, Mash, and a smug El-Melloi II. She looked ready to start a fight, but a stern glare from Aífe scolded her into submission.

While they all worked that out, I broke off from the group and went towards the front of the room, where a large screen had been repurposed into our own private theater, and got things ready. Marie, fortunately, had seen to most of what we needed already, or at least had enlisted Da Vinci in doing so, so it was fairly simple to turn everything on.

Arash still decided to join me. “No Shakespeare?” I murmured to him.

“I offered,” Arash told me just as quietly. “He turned me down. Said something about how he already knew how the movie was going to end, so there wasn’t any point in watching it.”

If that was what he thought... Well, there was no point in trying to order someone to enjoy a movie. And if we did, he’d probably spend the entire time pointing out plot holes or inconsistencies, and then no one would enjoy it.

Only once everyone else had been squared away, popcorn in hand and seats claimed, did I dim the lights and find a seat of my own — and with everyone else spacing themselves out so that they had enough room to be comfortable, no one questioned my decision to grab one on the fringes of the group. I wasn’t in the mood for popcorn, but when Emiya offered me a carton, I accepted it just to avoid questions.

With the push of a button, the movie started playing, and the studio logos went through their little animations. The chatter died down, and everyone settled in to watch.

But even as the others enjoyed all of the twists and turns and those of us who had never seen it made sounds of surprise and interest in all the right places, my heart wasn’t in it. The movie played, and for the most part, my eyes stayed on the screen, but I wasn’t watching it. My gaze kept drifting to find the back of a specific head, her pale hair flashing different colors to match the action happening in the movie. My mind kept straying, thinking, wondering.

Marisbury had wanted a weapon, no doubt. A machine whose purpose was to fulfill the Grand Order and who never gave much consideration to the world outside of that. Whether he cared that he’d gotten something much more than that or not, I couldn’t have said. I’d never known the man, and some part of me was glad that I hadn’t.

However it had happened, his Demi-Servant project had birthed an earnest young girl, and she’d grown into a kind, generous young woman with a spine of steel. In spite of him, it seemed, she’d become a complete, whole person, a bit sheltered, but expanding her horizons almost constantly. Someone worth respecting, not because of the Heroic Spirit she played host to, but because she was a genuinely good human being.

It just didn’t seem fair that she would never get to grow beyond that.