

## Chapter CXXII: Parole Party

Waiting for us in the cafeteria was a large banner proclaiming, “Welcome back, Ritsuka!” in the same sort of big, bold font you might expect from a birthday party. It hung from the ceiling, attached there through no visible means I could immediately see — I think Marie might actually have had a stroke if someone had gone as far as to drill in hooks to hang it from — and suspended above a set of tables that had been pushed together to form one longer table. To disguise this, someone had thrown a tablecloth over them, which was itself decorated with patterns of stars and confetti.

Maybe someone really had originally made it for birthday parties. I couldn’t see Marie approving, which would definitely be a good reason for me to never have seen it before.

Sat atop the table were a series of plates, one for each chair arrayed around it, and at the one end was a cart bearing a large cake. “Congratulations!” was written upon it in curling capital letters, blue on white, and multicolored streaks raced away from them like an explosion, ending in little starbursts at seemingly random distances.

Also, every single one of our Servants was there, and I think the only reason why the rest of the staff hadn’t been brought along was because some of them actually had jobs they needed to be taking care of and some of them were in need of sleep.

“What the —” Marie began.

As though she had been waiting for just that moment, Jeanne Alter blew on the noisemaker clenched between her teeth, and it bleated loudly like a deflating balloon.

Marie growled, “Why you...!”

Around her noisemaker, Jeanne Alter smirked.

“Is this all for me?” Ritsuka asked in a small voice.

“Of course, Master!” Bradamante answered like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Don’t read too much into it,” El-Melloi II warned. I wasn’t sure how he could stand here and say that with a straight face.

“It’s a bit slapdash,” said Arash, smiling, “but yes, it’s all for you, Ritsuka.”

“It was his idea,” said Aife, jerking her thumb at Arash. “He said that we should do something to celebrate the fact you came out of your ordeal safe and sound, and El-Melloi II said that sounded like some kind of party.”

“You make it sound like I was the one who suggested it,” El-Melloi II said sourly. “I was just making an observation.”

“But it was a very good observation!” Bradamante insisted.

“So I brought the idea to Emiya,” said Arash, “and he suggested bringing all of the Servants in for it, since none of us could do anything to help you out when you needed it. This was the least we could do.”

“Speak for yourself,” drawled Jeanne Alter. “While you sorry shits were sitting around going, ‘oh, woe is me, for my Master is trapped and cannot escape,’ I was in there with him taking asses and kicking names.”

“I think the phrase is actually kicking asses and taking names,” Siegfried interrupted politely.

Jeanne Alter grinned. “I know what I said.”

“And we all agreed,” said Hippolyta. “To make up for our inability to come to your aid, we would host a party for you celebrating your triumphant return. Even those of us who are not properly your Servant decided it was the best way to make it up to you.”

“After all,” Sam added, “we’re all on the same team, here, right? You might not hold everyone’s contract, Ritsuka, but these guys are all your friends and comrades.”

“People who have fought alongside you,” said Aífe. “People who have shed blood on the same battlefield, fighting the same enemies.”

“Some more metaphorically than others,” muttered El-Melloi II.

“So even if we were a little rushed,” Arash concluded, “it comes from the heart.”

Ritsuka’s eyes watered. He looked like he was holding back tears. “You guys...” he said hoarsely.

“And you didn’t think to ask permission?” Marie demanded furiously. “This is a public space! You can’t just go hanging whatever decorations you like wherever you want! People have to eat here!”

Arash winced. “Ah. Well, about that...”

“I think we can let it slide, in this case,” said Romani. He looked at Marie. “Don’t you, Director? After all, nothing was destroyed and no one was hurt by this.”

Marie scoffed and folded her arms. “It’s the principle of the thing!” she insisted sourly.

“The thing that amazes me,” said Da Vinci, “is how you all got this put together so quickly! We hadn’t even announced Ritsuka’s recovery to the rest of the facility yet, but you’ve already decorated here — if somewhat sparsely — and prepared a cake for the occasion.”

“That would be my doing!” Shakespeare proclaimed proudly. He bent into a theatrical bow. “When Master awoke earlier this morning, I set about informing all who would listen about his safe return from the jaws of death! The harrowing tale of his adventures through the perilous Château d’If and the horrors that awaited inside of it! His courageous triumph over impossible odds in the most treacherous prison ever forged by man!”

I wonder how much of it he embellished. There was no way he'd stayed around for the whole story, not to make it here quickly enough for Emiya to bake a cake. Not unless he'd been doing something he should have told us about, like using his Noble Phantasm to watch what was happening to Ritsuka inside of that curse.

That would have been very handy to have while we were all worrying about whether or not Ritsuka would even come out of that thing alive, let alone intact.

Da Vinci shrugged. "Well, that explains that, I suppose."

"Or enough of it, at least," Romani agreed. He looked about the room. "I don't see Emiya, though. He's the one who made the cake, isn't he?"

"I'm finishing breakfast!" Emiya called from the kitchen. "No one touch the cake yet! You'll spoil your appetite!"

Rika, who looked like she'd been eager to dive into the cake, let out a long, disappointed groan. "What are you, my mom?"

"It would be an upgrade from house-husband!"

Romani laughed even as Rika poked her tongue out in the direction of the kitchen. "I'm all for having your dessert before dinner, Rika, but considering how little you've been eating the last few days, I think this one time you really should listen to Emiya."

Ritsuka blinked and looked over at Romani. "How little she's been eating?"

"Ahaha!" Rika laughed awkwardly. "It's nothing, Onii-chan! Just a joke! He's kidding!"

"We were all worried, Senpai," said Mash, completely ignoring the look of mounting panic that was stretching across Rika's face. "But Senpai was worried most of all. She refused to leave your side the whole three days, except for, u-um, you know, the n-necessities."

Ritsuka turned to his sister, whose face had at first gone white, but was now so red that the only thing she could do was try and hide in her hands. It did nothing to hide her ears, however, the tips of which were red enough to make her hair seem pale and washed out.

"She did?"

"She was the first to volunteer when we started suggesting methods of mounting a rescue operation as well," Da Vinci told him, and by the smile curling her lips, she knew exactly what she was doing to Rika.

"And she was very angry with us when we decided we couldn't afford to jump into that sort of thing without being sure it was the right decision," Romani added.

"Stop!" Rika moaned.

“Your sister cares about you a great deal, Ritsuka,” said Arash, smiling, “so make sure you always come back to her, okay?”

Ritsuka smiled and nodded. “Yeah!”

Rika just groaned, hunching over as though she could disappear into her palms. “You’re all the worst!” she said through her hands.

I didn’t think it was very funny, but several people, including Romani and Da Vinci, smiled and laughed at the interplay. Maybe there were some old biases sneaking back in, but it felt a little too much like Winslow and the times when Emma had used the secrets I’d confided in her against me. Particularly the stuff about my mom.

Of course, Emma was long gone, and I didn’t even know if Sophia had survived Gold Morning. Madison? I hadn’t heard anything about her since before Leviathan. The people were long since irrelevant, and their petty school politicking inconsequential, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t remember how it had felt at the time to be on the receiving end.

It turned out, however, I didn’t need to step in on Rika’s behalf, because someone else did it for me.

“I’m going to butt my nose into things here,” Emiya announced as he wheeled another cart laden with food towards the table, “and save my poor Master from some well-deserved teasing. Breakfast is ready — a bit heavier than usual for a morning meal, but those of you with stomachs that don’t just convert whatever you eat into magical energy, you might thank me later when it’s time for the cake.”

Like some kind of caterer, he went about placing plates of delicious smelling food at each of the chairs arrayed around the table, saying all the while, “Circumstances have thrown our usual Servant meal day schedule off course, so I took the liberty of bending things around for today. There’s enough for everyone.”

“And exactly enough chairs around this table to sit everyone,” Da Vinci noted wryly.

“Of course,” said Emiya. “There’s a lot of things I don’t care about as a Heroic Spirit, but if there’s one thing I’ll take pride in, it’s my cooking. You should know by now that I don’t halfass it.”

“Next time, ask permission before you adjust the schedule,” Marie ordered grumpily. She picked out a chair and slid into it, and that seemed to be the cue for everyone else as well, so we all picked out a spot to sit down for breakfast.

As I should have expected, there were exactly enough chairs for all of us, and not one spare or missing.

“Apologies, Director,” said Emiya, “but Ritsuka’s recovery was sudden, so this entire thing is short notice. There wasn’t any time to ask permission to alter the schedule.”

“Which is exactly why I’m letting it slide, this time!” she replied.

Emiya chuckled. “Of course, Director.”

“I can’t say I have any experience with modern food,” said Hippolyta, “but it looks quite tasty.”

“Oh, just wait!” Bradamante gushed from beside her. “Sir Emiya’s food is on a completely different level! I promise you, once you’ve had a taste, you’ll be spoiled for anyone else’s food, no matter how good they are.”

“I don’t know if I’d go that far,” said Bellamy from her other side, “but this guy’s definitely good. I had a chance to try his food before, back in that Singularity, and man, he could cook for royalty!”

“High praise, coming from the Prince of Pirates,” said Emiya.

A huff of air escaped my nostrils, not quite a snort, and when a plate was set down in front of me, I picked up my utensils and dug in.

It was just as good as always. The way the chicken all but disintegrated in my mouth, the tangy flavor of the sauce that clung to the rice, the finely diced mushrooms that gave it that little extra burst — I wouldn’t say so out loud, but just for this, I was glad to have Emiya back.

I had to get his recipes before this was all over. I was only a halfway decent chef, had never made anything particularly complicated, but a halfway decent chef following instructions from a guy who could cook like this would still beat out pizza and takeout any day of the week.

As we all ate, the group descended into a murmur of disjointed conversations, each person striking up a conversation with their neighbors as they enjoyed another amazing meal made by Emiya. Da Vinci, Romani, and Marie had put their heads together and were discussing something quietly, casting the occasional furtive glance at the rest of the group. I was sure I would find out what that was about later. Shakespeare had enraptured Bellamy and Hippolyta (and Bradamante, by virtue of how close she was to the other two) with a dramatic retelling of Ritsuka’s adventures in Château d’If, completely with exaggerated motions of his fork and knife, as though he was waving about a sword.

There was almost certainly something going on there that he hadn’t told us about earlier. If he really had hid from us exactly how closely he could observe what was going on, then I was definitely going to have to have a talk with him. Maybe when I went to see what that multi-volume book set was all about and why he didn’t want me to look too closely at it.

El-Melloi II, Aífe, and Siegfried, however, seemed content to simply eat and watch the rest of us. El-Melloi II had even set his lollipop off to the side on his plate while he ate, and I couldn’t help wondering what his meal had to taste like with that sugary flavor still sitting on his tongue.

Arash, fittingly, had chosen to sit next to me, smiling a little, his eyes glittering as he took in the atmosphere. Satisfied at a job well done, if I had to guess, and I suppose he really had earned it, since he had basically put this all together.

*You really arranged all of this for Ritsuka’s sake?* I asked him as I ate my own meal.

He paused, glancing at me, and then kept eating. *For Ritsuka, but also for everyone else,* he replied. *Things have been tense, and no one was able to do anything about what was happening. With the simulator still unable to account for Servants and Noble Phantasms, there weren’t many ways for us all to blow off steam.*

And so he'd come up with this, a way for everyone to get a bit of a cathartic relief from that pressure. A way to bring the whole group together and unite everyone for an hour or two where they could let loose a little, and maybe do a bit of bonding.

I wished I'd thought of it. That this sort of thing came as naturally to me as it seemed to him.

*Thank you*, I told him.

He glanced at me again and smiled. *Anytime, Taylor*.

Once breakfast was over and we'd all had our fill, there was a bit of a lull, where everyone just talked about one thing or another. Ritsuka wound up telling the story of what had actually happened to him in Château d'If, sans Shakespeare's embellishments, complete with snide remarks from Jeanne Alter. Everyone took it in stride, like she wasn't doing anything unusual, because in a way, she wasn't.

It was frankly kind of remarkable. How she'd gone from an outsider to part of the group that quickly and easily, just because she'd been there to help Ritsuka when the rest of us couldn't. A single battle in Okeanos, one night watching a movie together, and an adventure with her Master — like that, she was an ally, and everyone seemed to have come to accept her eccentricities as part of her personality.

During the whole thing, Aífe only reached over to smack her on the back of the head once.

And now that it was over, we were laughing about it. Telling jokes. Just a day ago, most of us hadn't been sure if he was going to even survive, and now, everyone smiled and grinned and congratulated him for his bravery and daring, as though there had never been any doubt that he would conquer every one of the trials of Château d'If and come back to us. It honestly felt a little surreal.

But I guess these were all Servants. Heroic Spirits. The resurrected remnants of the exalted dead. Although the details were new, each and every single one of them had done stuff like this before and triumphed over it, including me. None of them were truly frightened or appalled — even if Bradamante and Mash gasped at the appropriate points — because once upon a time, they'd had adventures just like it.

I guess it was true what Arash had said to me before. That it wouldn't be long before the twins had stories of their own to tell, tales of their own daring-dos that would capture attention and captivate the mind of the listener. I think a part of me had expected that I would be there for all of them.

Once Ritsuka had finished telling the tale of Prison Tower on the Isle of Despair — I had a feeling that was going to be the official title on the report when it was filed — Emiya reappeared with a large, flat knife and declared that it was time for cake, to much enthusiasm. He cut the cake we'd seen earlier into perfectly even slices, one for each of us, and then started passing them out to everyone at the table.

(Mash fed a little bit of hers to her perpetual goblin. It was probably too much to hope for that the thing would get sick, and as much as we hated each other, I didn't dislike Fou enough to wish his vomit on Mash and her clothing.)

Naturally, Emiya was a good baker, too. I didn't think I could say it was quite as good as the meals he made, but it wasn't at all bad either. Sweet, but not too sweet, with just enough icing to enhance the flavor without making you sick of it by the time you finished eating. Simple, but satisfying.

Eventually, however, our little party had to come to an end, and Marie stood up and smashed her hands together loudly. The entire table fell silent.

"Alright," she said when she was sure she had everyone's attention, "we can't stay here all day, because *some* of us have responsibilities we have to get back to —"

Romani sighed.

"— so I'm officially calling an end to this!" She turned a stern look on Ritsuka. "I'll be expecting a report on the entire incident to go along with your report on the Okeanos Singularity. Everyone else," she added, "you can return to your normal routines until it's time for the briefing on the next Singularity, as long as you aren't cluttering up the cafeteria!"

"In other words," Emiya chimed in, smirking, "you don't have to go home, but you can't stay here."

Rika groaned and immediately turned to El-Melloi II, "Hot Pops!"

"You've already missed out on three days of lessons," he said mercilessly, predicting her request, and when her face fell, a grin curled on his lips, "so I don't see what one more day will hurt."

Rika's face lifted with hope, and her mouth pulled wide.

"I won't make you train on a full stomach," Aífe said, "but I fully expect to see you in the gym tomorrow morning, you two. You especially, Ritsuka, to make up for what you lost in bed for the last few days."

Rika's smile died again almost as soon as it was born, and she sagged in her chair. "Ugh!"

Ritsuka only sighed. "Right. I'll make sure we'll be there."

Aífe nodded. "See that you do."

She and El-Melloi II were the first to leave, followed shortly by Siegfried, who offered a short, but earnest, "I am glad to see you recovered, Lord Ritsuka," before he went. Shakespeare made his "exit, stage left!" shortly afterwards, cackling to himself about what a great story this whole thing would make. Hippolyta politely excused herself not long after, and then Da Vinci, Romani, and Marie all went, too.

"As fun as this has all been, there *were* several projects I happened to be in the middle of before this fiasco," Da Vinci said, "so I'm going to get back to those now. Ciao, everyone!"

And she was gone.

“Yeah, I guess we do have things we kind of need to get back to, huh?” Romani said with the air of a man walking to his death. “Man, even being Vice Director has a lot of responsibilities attached, doesn’t it?”

“You’re the only one qualified for the position,” Marie told him. “It’s only natural that I should give you that sort of responsibility.”

Romani laughed self-deprecatingly. “Well, when you put it that way…”

“You can do it, Doc!” Rika cheered for him.

“Fou-fou! Fou-kyu-kyu fou fou!” the gremlin echoed. Mash scratched under his chin, to his delight.

“Fou is saying, we believe in you, Doctor Roman,” she translated. “So give it your best, okay?”

Romani smiled. “With an endorsement like that, I guess I don’t have any other choice, huh?”

Marie looked as though she very much wanted to roll her eyes, but managed to suppress the impulse at least long enough to make it out into the hallway first.

With most of us gone, there wasn’t much reason to hang around, so with a promise to see the twins and Mash later on for lunch and then dinner, I excused myself and left.

It was tempting to head off to the library and try to look up some more information about King Solomon and his Demon Gods, but I was pretty sure I’d exhausted what little there was a while ago. Looking back on it, it was entirely possible that the reason I was having so much trouble finding anything that wasn’t locked behind Marisbury’s access codes was because Flauros had removed or destroyed anything really important while he was here hiding in Lev’s body, to make sure that we had as little to go on as possible and couldn’t prepare for a direct confrontation. It was the sort of thing I would have done in their place.

Frustrating. Doubly so because there wasn’t anything I could do about it one way or the other.

I’d missed my morning workout, so I resolved to catch up on it later in the afternoon once my food had had a chance to digest and went back to my room to sit down with a novel. Without anything else to do much research on, it was the only thing I really could do with my time.

After the panic and the agony of waiting that the last few days had been, it felt a little odd to go back to the mundanity of life at Chaldea between deployments. I’d spent almost the entirety of the last three days on metaphorical pins and needles, so it was kind of strange to lose that urgency and that undercurrent as I went about my day.

Although I wouldn’t say I’d forgotten about that dream I’d had, the one about racing through the Birdcage to rescue Ritsuka. That… If Doctor Yamada was around, I would have probably gone to her about it, just to make sure the air was clear and so was my conscience, but since the only person even resembling a mental healthcare professional currently in Chaldea was Romani, who was overworked on the best of days, there wasn’t much I could do except try and convince myself that everything was fine and it didn’t mean anything. Just the stress getting to me.



I wasn't sure what it said that the dream had smushed together my past and my present the way it had and I honestly wasn't sure I wanted to know. It probably just meant I missed my friends, and I already knew that. I didn't need a psychiatrist to figure that out.

Nonetheless, by the time dinner rolled around, nothing had happened. There was no new emergency making a play for our attention and no one had been ensnared by a curse by any of the enemies we'd defeated during our times deployed. Aside from that morning, it was a completely normal day at Chaldea, and I was actually kind of glad it wound up so boring.

I still left Muninn on the shelf in Ritsuka's room, just to make sure he didn't relapse overnight. Everyone seemed to have forgotten she was there, and I would keep her there until I was sure there wasn't anything to worry about — a day, maybe two or three on the long end — then, I'd retrieve her without anyone being any the wiser.

I made sure to look away during private moments, of course, by deliberately turning my attention away from Muninn's senses whenever he started reaching for any of the buttons, zippers, or hems on his clothing. Just because I was worried about him after the ordeal of the last few days didn't mean I was going to *completely* disregard his privacy.

Fortunately, nothing happened. Muninn didn't alert me to any abnormalities throughout the night, and Ritsuka went to bed and woke up without any trouble at all. It seemed the curse really was well and truly broken.

I snuck Muninn out the next morning while he was training with Aífe. Just so I wasn't tempted to leave her in there for another week.

The day after Ritsuka woke up from his coma, things had returned completely to normal. We all went back to our routines — a morning workout in the gym, supervised by Aífe, followed by a hearty breakfast cooked by our resident professional chef, and then a few hours of relaxation until lunchtime, and later on in the afternoon, while the twins were off having a lesson in magecraft fundamentals with El-Melloi II, Marie and I met Mash at the pool for another swimming lesson.

As he had every day since they started, Fou decided to tag along, still in that ridiculously oversized jersey and still with that annoying whistle of his. It was hard to say exactly how intelligent that thing was, but I was beginning to suspect that he was doing it just to get on my nerves. The frustrating part was that it was working.

On the bright side, Mash was coming along well and picking up how to swim with speed. Considering that was the main point behind these lessons, I decided I was going to take my wins on that front where I could. Let the little gremlin have his fun, as long as Mash was having hers. I'd dealt with a lot pettier nonsense from people who really knew how to hurt me, so I wasn't going to let him get to me.

Sorry, Fou, but if you were trying to get under my skin, you were going to have to try a lot harder than that.

Soon enough, it was time to call it quits for the day again, and the three of us climbed out of the pool to dry off. I would never say so aloud, but despite how classy and tasteful her swimsuit was,

Marie looked a little silly in her swim cap and goggles. Like the stereotypical aliens in pre-cape B-movies almost, although I suppose I probably didn't look all that much different.

It gave me a distraction not to think about Mash, now that Ritsuka's issue was dealt with, so that I didn't have to remember how much Marisbury had taken from her and how much would be taken from her in the not so distant future.

"It really isn't as hard as I was afraid it would be," Mash commented cheerfully.

"You're doing well," I told her. "You're a real natural at this, Mash."

She smiled at me. "That's only because I have such great teachers, Miss Taylor. You and the Director seem to know just how to explain everything so I can understand it!"

Privately, I didn't really think that was true. I was trying to teach her by mimicking the lessons the Wards had way back when, but as with most government programs, those lessons had only been designed to cover the bases and nothing more. If I hadn't already had a decently solid foundation, I didn't think I would have learned much of anything in them, and the fact that Mash was getting as much out of my own poor imitations as she was had to have had as much to do with her own talent as it did Marie shoring up my gaps.

A complicated expression crossed Marie's face. "And...you're having fun?"

Mash blinked for a second, and then she smiled again. "Yes, I think I am! I know it's an important skill I need to have in case a situation arises during a deployment inside a Singularity, but it's actually really fun, too!"

The shrill blare of a sports whistle blew, and the little gremlin came trotting up to us, letting out another sharp trill with every bounce of his paws as he bounded over. Mash, unbothered, reached down to let him jump up onto her arm and hop up to her shoulder.

"Don't worry, Fou," she told him, "I know you'd come to rescue me if I was in trouble."

I tried to imagine it jumping into the pool to waddle out and rescue a struggling Mash, and the mental image was so ridiculous that I actually wanted to laugh.

"It'll be dinnertime soon enough," I announced. "We should all go clean up and get ready."

"Of course!" said Mash. She gave me and the Director a polite bow. "Thank you for another lesson, Miss Taylor, Director! I look forward to our next one tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow," I echoed.

And she turned around and left. Fou looked back at me from his perch, pinning me with his beady little eyes for a few seconds, and then turned back around and ignored me as he and Mash disappeared down the hallway.

For a long moment, Marie and I stood there in silence, interrupted only by the sloshing of the pool and the hum of the filter and pumps.

Then, haltingly, Marie said, “It’s...”

She trailed off. I didn’t need her to finish. Not when I was having the same conflicted thoughts, wanting to be happy for Mash but struggling because I knew what awaited her in about a year and a half. The shadow that clung to these moments of simple joy.

“Yeah.”

There was nothing else either of us could say, so we left the pool room and went back to our own rooms to shower and get ready for dinner. Expectedly, when I walked into the cafeteria about an hour later, it was to find Emiya had made another delicious meal, and I sat with the twins and Mash as we all ate and enjoyed it, them tired from their lesson with El-Melloi II and me pleasantly worn out from my own lesson with Mash.

At least this much could be relatively uncomplicated. Rika and Emiya, it seemed, still hadn’t managed to patch things up between them, but I gave them some leeway on account of what the last half a week had been like and resolved to give them another few days to work things out. If and when I needed to intervene, well, I’d work out the details then. Something told me it wouldn’t be as simple as locking them in a room together until they ironed everything out.

Halfway through dinner, four communicators chimed, and I shared a confused look with the twins and Mash as we all answered it to find a message from Da Vinci. Short, simple, and perfectly vague, it read:

*I have a surprise for you all tomorrow! But I’ll need your Mystic Code modules first, so please bring them down to my workshop before bed tonight, okay?*

I glanced at the twins, but they just looked back at me, equally befuddled, no more aware of what this surprise might be than I was.

Whatever it was, knowing Da Vinci, it would either be incredibly thoughtful or incredibly ridiculous. Or maybe both at once.