

Chapter CLXIV: Twelve Days of Christmas

For a moment, Nero froze, eyes wide and confused, and Rika, perhaps sensing something wrong, pulled back.

“Best Buddy?” she asked uncertainly.

“I...” Nero began. “That...that term. Why do I...?”

She grunted suddenly and stumbled back, clutching at her temple with her free hand as her lips pulled back into a snarling grimace and her eyes squeezed shut. Rika stepped back, too, and I could practically see her spirits fall as the reality of the situation sank in.

“Oh no,” Mash murmured softly. “Emperor Nero doesn’t...”

“It was never a guarantee,” Marie said quietly. “The only thing that made it at all possible in the first place was the nature of Singularities themselves, and the fact that it seemed to be only a partial summon or some kind of...incomplete Demi-Servant means that it was a longshot either way.”

Rika made a nearly silent distressed sound in her throat. “So she doesn’t...?”

“It seems that there is at least some form of sentiment,” said Da Vinci, “but what might exist beyond that, I’m afraid only Emperor Nero can tell us.”

Rika took a tentative step forward again. “Best Buddy? You in there?”

Nero’s eyes snapped open. “That...that term! I know it!” she said. “How do I know it? How do I know *you*?”

“Don’t you remember?” Rika asked, and there was something desperate in her voice. “The baths? The bread? Fighting for my house-husband? Fighting Romulus? Super Action Mom and Queen Booty? Sparty?”

Nero looked around the room like a cornered animal, eyes swiveling back and forth. “I...”

“Rika,” said Ritsuka, and when Rika looked back at him over her shoulder, he held out one hand and wagged his fingers. “Ba-la-la-la-la-la-la.”

This obviously meant something to Rika, because her eyes went wide and her eyebrows rose up towards her hairline, and she whipped back around.

“Here!” She thrust her hand out, fist closed. “Remember?”

Nero hesitated, brow furrowing until her forehead wrinkled, and then she pulled her hand away from her temple and cautiously and slowly reached out. Gently and uncertainly, she pressed her knuckles against Rika’s, and then her face morphed with wonder and surprise. A moment later, it became delight, and her mouth pulled into a broad, familiar grin.

“Mm-mm! Best Buddy!”

“Yes!” Rika shrieked, and this time, when she launched herself at Nero, Nero caught her with a laugh, letting her sword fall from her fingers. “You’re back, you’re back, you’re back! Oh man, I’ve missed you!”

“Of course I’m back!” Nero proclaimed confidently. “Emperor Nero could never forget such precious friends, not when they helped her save Rome, and especially not her Best Buddy!”

“How did you know that would work?” Marie asked Ritsuka.

“I didn’t,” he admitted. “But I figured it was worth a shot.”

“Ritsuka!” Nero burst out, turning that grin to each of us in turn. “And Mash, and Taylor!”

Her eyes went down to my shirt, and her brow furrowed again as she read the words printed on it. Her smile turned into a thunderous scowl.

“Is that so?” she demanded. “Mm-mm!” She turned to Romani. “Shame on you, Director Romani!” Romani could only blink at her, nonplussed. “And you as well, Lady Da Vinci! And...”

When she came upon Marie, she stopped and scrutinized her, and eventually declared, “I do not know you, but I must assume you are equally as guilty! Mm-mm! Do you not understand the value of your team?”

Marie gaped at her, indignant and stunned into silence. Her mouth moved, but no words made it past her lips.

Rika snorted and broke out into laughter while Ritsuka groaned and dropped his head into his hands. I had to be the one to break it to her and tell her, “Nero, it’s a joke.”

She stared at me, uncomprehending. “A joke?”

Rika was still laughing too hard to provide context, so it fell on me again.

“I don’t know where or when it started,” I told Nero, “but some time ago, people started wearing t-shirts like this one that said, ‘I did such-and-such and all I got was this lousy t-shirt.’ It’s just meant to be funny.”

“I...hehe...I told Da Vinci-chan she should make one for Senpai,” Rika said, still giggling.

“I see,” Nero said, nodding, although I wasn’t sure she really did.

“I think Director Marie understands exactly how valuable her team is,” Ritsuka said. “After all, she’s the one who recruited Senpai and made her leader, and Senpai *did* save her life back in Fuyuki.”

Nero’s head swiveled, stopping on each person around the room, and her brow furrowed again. “Director Marie? I’m confused. Was not Director Romani the leader of this organization?”

Romani coughed into his fist. “Technically speaking, I was only ever Acting Director while Director Animosphere was, uh, indisposed. Although I *was* made Vice Director for some reason, so I guess my position didn’t change that much.”

“And now there is a Director Animosphere?” Nero complained.

“Olga Marie Animosphere!” Marie finally snapped. “Lord of the Clock Tower, and most importantly for you, Director of Chaldea!”

“Emperor Nero,” Da Vinci cut in gently, “you should have received an information packet when you were summoned that filled you in on some of what has happened since last you saw the Masters in Rome.”

Nero nodded. “Yes! And I see that you have managed to resolve two more of these Singularities! Mm-mm! Without me at your side, at that!”

“A lot of things...happened after Rome,” I settled on, understatement of the century as it was. “Not everything went to plan, and we wanted to make sure we got the right person when we summoned you.”

“Who else would you have gotten?” Nero asked, confused.

All things considered? Maybe the Whore of Babylon. How it connected to the Nero we knew, I had no idea, but there had been parallels made by earlier historians that could very well have skewed the summoning results.

“There’s no way of knowing. We’re still not sure why our last summoning went the way it did, so we took all of the precautions we could to make sure we got the right person this time.”

Nero’s brow furrowed suspiciously. “I suppose that makes sense...”

“More importantly, Best Buddy, you’re just in time!” said Rika, grinning broadly. “Dinner will be ready soon, and Emiya is cooking up an absolute feast for Christmas!”

“Christmas?” Nero asked.

Somehow, Rika’s grin grew even broader.

Twenty minutes later, as she looked around at all of the decorations strung about the cafeteria and the crowd of people conversing and waiting around for dinner, Nero nodded to herself, “Ah, Christmas! I understand now! Mm-mm! But I confess that you never seemed to me to be a Christian, Rika. My apologies if I offended you during your stay in Rome!”

“Eh,” said Rika, awkwardly shifting her shoulders. “It’s not...really... I mean, there are Christians in Japan, Best Buddy, but that’s not really why most of us celebrate the holiday there. I...don’t know if Onii-chan and I even technically belong to any religion?”

“We weren’t baptized or anything,” Ritsuka confirmed. “And we don’t observe any religious holidays, aside from Christmas, I mean.”

Nero looked at them curiously. “Then why do you celebrate Christmas?”

“The presents, of course!” Rika proclaimed, and then, almost sheepishly, “Although we...don’t really have too many of those, this year.”

“You don’t?” asked Nero.

“We can’t exactly go shopping for presents here, can we?” I pointed out.

Nero scowled and drew herself up to her full — and not very impressive — height. “That simply will not do! Mm-mm! This cannot be a proper celebration if something so essentially is missing! We will simply have to —”

“Emperor Nero!” Arash said as he came closer. “It’s been a while, but you look just the same as the last time we met!”

“Arash!” Nero beamed. “And you look hale, as well! Oh?” Her eyes homed in on Jackie, who trailed after Arash. “And who is this? You appear to be another Servant, but you must be quite incredible to have become a Heroic Spirit so young!”

“We’re Jackie,” Jackie answered simply. “Mommy’s Servant.”

Nero’s brow furrowed. “Mommy?”

I held out my hand, and Jackie skipped over with a smile, reaching out to grasp it with her own. Nero appeared only more confused, so I clarified, “We encountered her during the last Singularity as a Stray Servant, the same as Queen Boudica, Spartacus, and Aífe. All she wanted was someone to be her mother, so it was a fairly easy choice to recruit her.”

“Mommy is the best,” Jackie said with all of the confidence only a girl her age could have.

“I see!” Nero nodded. “I suppose the bond between Master and Servant takes many forms! Mm-mm! It was only unexpected!”

“Hey,” Rika said suddenly, “you didn’t get the chance to meet everyone else, did you? I mean, you got to see Tii-chan for a few minutes as everything was wrapping up, but everyone else was back here while all of that was going down! And Hot Pops is still here, too!”

“Miss Renée wasn’t here at the time either,” said Mash.

“Oh man,” Rika gushed, “if you thought Emiya’s food was great, wait until you get a load of what happens when those two team up!”

“Those two?” Nero asked.

“We’ve been bringing back Stray Servants after each Singularity whenever they agree to stay on with us,” I explained. “In London, we met a homunculus created by a Servant there, Nicolas Flamel, and since she didn’t exist in proper history, the only place for her to go was with us.” To the twins, I added, “Sam, Jeanne Alter, and Hippolyta weren’t around during Septem either.”

“Oh,” said Mash. “No, they weren’t, were they?”

“Sam? Hippolyta? Jeanne Alter?” Nero echoed.

“Servants we met in Okeanos,” Ritsuka told her. “They came back with us after we corrected it. Jeanne Alter is the Servant we summoned after we got back from Rome, and she’s the reason why we had to wait to summon you, because she wasn’t the Servant we were trying to summon, although, in a way, she kind of was, too.”

The first part, Nero understood well enough, but the second part only confused her more.

“Father!” Mordred’s voice cried, interrupting. “After everything, you decided to show your face here?”

We all whirled about to see her coming towards us fast like an approaching storm, fully decked out in her armor and her sword in her hand, snarl curling on her lips. She only had eyes for Nero.

Nero, sensing the hostility, manifested her sword and brandished it. “Father? Mm-mm! I sired no children, mysterious person, and I certainly don’t recognize you!”

This was the wrong thing to say, because it only pissed Mordred off more. “You...! Do you despise me that much that you still refuse to even acknowledge — !”

“Sir Mordred, wait!” Mash urged, placing herself between the two and holding out her hands to placate the furious Mordred. “This isn’t King Arthur!”

“Outta the way, Shieldy!” Mordred growled at her. “That...! That...” Her brow furrowed, and over Mash’s shoulder, she gave Nero another look, eyes traveling first to that ridiculous sword, then to the sheer, translucent dress, and finally stopping on the generous bust. “You’re...not my father.”

“I should think not!” Nero agreed.

“This is Emperor Nero,” Mash explained, still staying between them, just in case. “We mistook her for King Arthur the first time we saw her, too. Although we can’t say how, there...might be some relation, and that’s why they look so similar.”

Mordred grunted. “Ugh. Damn it. And there I went letting myself get all hot and bothered. Fucking of course.” (“Phrasing!” Rika choked out as she held back a giggle. Mordred ignored her.) She sighed and relaxed, letting her sword and armor vanish. “Sorry about that. You kinda look like someone I don’t get along with, and I kinda... What’s that modern phrase? Hopped the gun?”

“Jumped the gun,” I corrected her.

Mordred nodded. “That.”

Nero relaxed, too, letting her own sword vanish. “I shall forgive it! Mm-mm! Emperor Nero is as magnanimous as she is generous!”

Mordred huffed a chuckle and grinned. “*Definitely* not my father. It’s fucking spooky, though. You lined ‘em up next to each other and put ‘em in the same armor and I ain’t sure I coulda told the difference.”

Wisely, no one mentioned that the same could be said of her, because if Mordred did her hair up the way Arthur did and put on the same clothes, no one would’ve been able to tell them apart until one of them opened her mouth.

“You know,” said Rika thoughtfully, tapping her chin with one finger, “now that you mention it, do you think Jalter kinda looks like that, too?”

My brow furrowed, and in my head, the image popped up, unbidden, of Jeanne Alter dressed in King Arthur’s gear. I wouldn’t have said so before, just because Jeanne Alter’s hair was a little too wild and a bit too wavy near the bottom to match, but if I compared them with Mordred as a sort of midway point, then I really could start seeing similarities to their facial structures. Differences, too, but the shape of the jaw and the set of the eyes were...actually eerily close.

By the disturbed look on Ritsuka’s face, he had realized it, too.

We were saved from having to think any more deeply about it by the ringing of a bell, and Emiya’s voice called out to the entire cafeteria, “Dinner hours are officially starting! If you’re ready to eat, then come and get the first batch while it’s hot!”

Nero gasped. “Food! Mm-mm! More importantly, Emiya’s food!”

And that was all it took for her and Rika to race towards the front of the line before it could form, leaving the rest of us behind to watch them. My stomach rumbled to let me know that I was hungry, too, and several of the technicians who had decided to take the chance to take a break from their posts and eat were gathering behind those two, just as eager if not just as excitable about it.

I gave Jackie’s hand a squeeze and offered her a smile. “Let’s get something to eat, too, hm?”

Jackie smiled and nodded, proclaiming, “Mister Emiya makes really good food! We like it!”

More sedately, the rest of us joined the line leading up to the counter where Emiya served Christmas dinner, and even from the back of it, I could smell the rich aroma of the feast he had prepared, easily the equal of what he and Renée had made yesterday. Jackie was a veritable ball of excitement next to me, almost vibrating, but she was better behaved about it than any girl her apparent age had any right to be and didn’t complain a single bit about the wait.

That didn’t mean she didn’t stare intently at our stacked trays when it was finally our turn and Emiya started dishing food up for us. She could have bored a hole through them if she had Mystic Eyes, and judging by the faint look of amusement on Emiya’s face, he knew it, too.

Once we were seated and everything was sorted out, Jackie looked tempted to inhale it all as quickly as she could, and it seemed to take every ounce of her self-control to maintain the manners I had instilled in her in London and savor every bite. Even I had to admit that it was cute.

Rika and Nero, on the other hand, didn't appear to have any compunctions about it. They abandoned all pretense of politeness and ate eagerly, as though this was to be the last meal either of them ever had.

It was a good thing we didn't eat quite this richly every day. I didn't think there was an exercise regimen in the world — near godly teacher or no — that would keep Rika from putting on a dozen or two pounds by the end of this.

Around us, people slowly filtered in and out, and eventually, even the other Servants came in to grab a tray of their own, enjoying the chance to taste yet more of Emiya and Renée's cooking. Several of them stopped by long enough to greet Nero, or in some cases, to meet her for the first time, and some of them were stopped by Nero when she recognized them.

"Court Mage!" she called out to El-Melloi II, and he had to stop, a look of exasperated annoyance scrunching up his face.

"We're not in Rome anymore," he told her bluntly, "which means I'm not your court anything anymore, Emperor Nero."

"That doesn't matter!" Nero told him imperiously. "I am Emperor Nero! I *am* Rome! Where I am, Rome is also!"

"That's not the way that works," he tried, but she wouldn't have it.

"It does! Mm! It works that way because I said it does!"

Rika found this incredibly fun, or at least found some form of schadenfreude in El-Melloi II's frustration, because she laughed all the way through their bickering and was still giggling to herself after El-Melloi II gave up and stalked away with his tray to find the furthest table from ours that he could.

Bellamy, on the other hand, rolled with it a lot more easily.

"Hey!" he said as he approached us. "New Servant, right? Nice to meetcha! Name's Sam, Sam Bellamy."

"It is your honor!" Nero declared, but Bellamy just laughed it off.

"Yeah, I guess it is," he agreed easily. "Emperor Nero, right? I've heard a couple of things about you from Rika and the others, all of them good, don't worry."

Nero nodded. "Naturally! There are only good things to hear about me, after all! Mm-mm!"

Eventually, Marie and Romani came in, but only long enough to grab a tray and a mug of coffee before heading back to work. "We're going over the data from the summoning with Da Vinci," Marie informed us. "If we can figure out what factors made this summoning different from the last one, then they should become more reliable in the future."

“Should, anyway,” Romani added. “It’s all fine when you’re trying to summon King Arthur using her sheath that you excavated from a lake in Cornwall, but when all you have is a shard of the Round Table, it might not be possible to narrow down who shows up or what class they have.”

The sour look on Marie’s face told me she hated that he was right.

“You guys are working on Christmas, Boss Lady? Doc?” Rika asked, aghast.

“Of course we are!” Marie told her. “Magi have known that gods of all forms exist since the Age of Gods, but mankind isn’t dependent on their good will anymore, so why would we bother observing their religious practices? Especially when there’s important work that needs doing!”

Because that was the kind of person she was. Marie didn’t know how to give anything less than her all to anything she set her mind to, but that made things all the worse when it combined with the toxic mess of her self-esteem. I was going to have to talk to Da Vinci about doing something nice for her — should already have done so, in fact, if not for the aftermath of the bomb Solomon had dropped in our laps a week ago.

“That’s what it means to be the Director, Rika,” I explained. “You work even while your employees are celebrating.”

Rika pouted theatrically, and then declared, “I’ll find a way to infect you with the Christmas spirit, Boss Lady, just you watch!”

Like the day before, the dinner party continued long into the night, and although the celebrations never got truly out of hand, that wasn’t to say that things didn’t get...rowdy, for lack of a better word. Somewhere along the way, harder alcohol got introduced and the eggnog got set aside. An arm-wrestling tournament got set up, if it could really be called a tournament, and Siegfried, Hippolyta, Aífe, Mordred, Jeanne Alter, and even Bellamy wound up taking turns trying to beat each other.

It was, if nothing else, an interesting study in how compatibility could affect the outcome of a battle between Servants. Sam put up a valiant effort, but lost to everyone because his strength was so much lower than theirs, while everyone else was mostly evenly matched in terms of raw strength, but Mordred and Jeanne Alter both lost to Siegfried without much contest, because Siegfried had both attributes of a dragon and was a dragonslayer. The latter gave him an advantage over Mordred, who had dragon attributes she must have inherited from King Arthur, and the former gave him an advantage over Jeanne Alter, whose status as a “dragon witch” increased his own performance.

By the number of expletives that left their mouths, neither of them was either happy or willing to accept defeat gracefully. Polite to a fault, Siegfried offered an apology and a smile every time, but naturally, that only pissed them off even more and made them struggle even harder to beat him.

By the expletives from the crowd that gathered to watch and the money that changed hands, it looked like several people had made bets on the matches, too.

It was good to see everyone in such high spirits, that even in the midst of everything happening and the terrible circumstances, the crew manning our metaphorical ship could still find moments of levity and joy.

It made me wish I'd done better by the Chicago Wards, once upon a time.

As the night drew on, what had started as a dinner feast turned into a proper party, and Rika managed to draw Nero, Bradamante, and even Mordred into singing Christmas carols with a couple of the technicians. I even caught Jackie humming along, bobbing her head to the tunes and smiling, and it was such an innocent, carefree moment that I wisely chose to pretend I didn't notice.

Eventually, real life had to intrude, and the cafeteria started to empty out as the partygoers left the merrymaking behind to return to either their shifts or their beds, because everyone knew that Marie wouldn't accept any excuses for slacking off tomorrow, no matter what today was.

That was when Rika had the brilliant idea of finishing things off with a movie marathon.

"What are you even planning to watch?" Ritsuka asked.

"Christmas movies! Duh!" Rika replied with a roll of her eyes. "What else do you watch on Christmas? I wanna see if I can get any of these hardened badasses with Tiny Tim!"

"Tiny Tim?" Nero asked.

Rika shook her head. "Nuh uh, not telling! You have to watch the movie to see! If I spoil it, then it won't be the same!"

"Originally," Mash explained, "it's from a book called *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens —"

"Shush!" Rika pressed her finger to Mash's lips, and Mash blinked, crossing her eyes to look down at Rika's hand. "You can't just go spoiling a classic like that, Cinnabon! It won't have the same impact!"

El-Melloi II grunted, then looked around at the Servants still gathered and smirked. "Know what? I'll actually agree with Rika, this time. It'll be interesting to see how all of these great warriors respond to movies like that. Make sure to include Frosty," he added.

"Oh man," Rika bemoaned, "I should have made a *list*!"

And that was how we wound up meandering over to the orientation room — Renée in tow — while Arash made a quick trip down to the library to find a handful of movies for us to spend the rest of the night watching. I thought about taking a pass and just going back to curl up in my own bed with a book, but this was Jackie's first — and even if we fixed all of the Singularities and defeat Solomon, maybe even only — Christmas, and it seemed almost cruel to deprive her of the essential experience I'd had as a child of snuggling up with your family and watching a Christmas movie or two.

We wound up watching *It's a Wonderful Life*, then, of course, *A Christmas Carol*, and *Frosty the Snowman*. Jackie was enthralled the entire time, her eyes glued to the screen as she leaned back in my lap and snacked on caramel flavored popcorn.

Perhaps as I should have expected, none of the Servants got particularly teary-eyed over the sad moments in any of the movies, none of them except Nero, who loudly blew her nose several times throughout the night, but *It's a Wonderful Life* seemed to hit Renée like a truck. No one else seemed

to hear the soft, plaintive whines she let out at several points, not over the audio from the movie itself, and I think the only reason I heard it at all was because she was sitting so close to me.

The tears, however, were going to be harder to ignore, but she didn't seem to be trying particularly hard to hide them.

By the time the credits rolled for *Frosty the Snowman*, it was well past midnight, and I begged off staying for the next movie — *The Santa Clause*, because of course Rika would like that one — to take Jackie to bed for the night. Arash helpfully offered to escort us back to my room, and at that point, I didn't have the energy to say no, so he walked back with us.

As she had every night, Jackie snuggled into my arms, mumbled a quiet, "Goodnight, Mommy," and I wasn't sure I hadn't already fallen asleep before I could get out my own, "Goodnight, Jackie."

The next morning, I was awoken suddenly when Marie burst into my room without knocking and announced, "They're gone!"

"What?" I asked her blearily, still half-asleep.

"The twins, Mash, and Emperor Nero," she answered frantically, "they're gone! They're not in the facility!"

That jolted me into wakefulness, and I shot straight up in my bed. "What?"

Marie looked like she had barely woken up herself, such was the state of her hair. "They're gone!" she said for the third time. "There was an unplanned Rayshift in the middle of the night —"

"Unplanned Rayshift?" I demanded.

Had they...? No, no way. No matter how forceful a personality Nero was and no matter how prickly Jeanne Alter could be, no one in the facility right now would threaten violence to get their way, not to their friends and allies.

"Mommy?" Jackie murmured.

My head whirled around towards her. "Go back to sleep, Jackie," I told her as gently as I could. "I just have to take care of something real quick, and then I'll be back."

"Mm..."

Carefully, I extracted myself from the blankets and out from under Jackie, and when I climbed out of bed, I met Marie's eyes and jerked my head towards the door. It was only once the door was closed behind us and we were several yards down the hall that I stopped and turned to her again. "Unplanned Rayshift?"

She nodded jerkily.

"It was logged in my terminal this morning," she revealed, rushing through the explanation as though she needed to get it all out in one breath. "Last night, at 4:15 am, Ritsuka, Rika, Mash, and

Emperor Nero performed an unscheduled Rayshift into the London Singularity. No note, no permission, and no reason stated, just that they went!”

“That’s...”

Reckless, I wanted to say, except that Nero had a whole skill in her kit dedicated entirely to, ‘I can do whatever I want because I’m emperor!’ I couldn’t even say it would be entirely out of character for her either.

“Is one of the Grails missing?” was the next thing I asked.

But Marie shook her head. “That’s the first thing I checked! All of the Grails recovered from the Singularities are accounted for, and nothing else seems to be missing — although, of course, I haven’t had the chance to check everything, so there’s no telling if they took anything else!”

She looked five seconds away from a freakout, so I set my hands on her shoulders and told her, “Breathe, Marie.”

She did, taking large, gulping breaths until I could visibly see her start to calm down. I made sure to keep my voice steady and even when I asked, “Romani?”

“Still asleep,” she answered. A flicker of annoyance crossed her face and her lips pulled into a short, tight scowl. “I sent him a message as soon as I found out, but he hasn’t responded.”

Considering my clock had said it was only about 7:30, that was probably to be expected. He didn’t tend to be up before nine on most days, and ten was more common.

“Da Vinci?” I asked next, because that was the last person who could have set any of this in motion without further help.

Marie’s brow furrowed, and she admitted, “I...hadn’t gotten around to asking her yet.” She stuck her thumbnail in her mouth, chewing on it with her front teeth. “But why would she possibly...?”

“Only one way to find out, right?”

“Yes,” said Marie, her voice tightly controlled.

But Da Vinci turned out to not be in her workshop when we got down there, so we had to go looking in the Command Room next, and it was lucky that she turned out to be there, because we would have had to start pestering her with messages if she wasn’t. When the door to the room whooshed open, she turned from the Director’s console and greeted us with a smile.

“Taylor,” she said, “Director Animosphere, good morning, and I suppose a good Boxing Day, if you happen to celebrate it.”

Oh, fuck me, don’t tell me...

“Did you authorize an unscheduled Rayshift last night?” Marie gritted out immediately.

Da Vinci laughed awkwardly. “Ah, yes, I suppose I should have remembered that all such records are automatically forwarded to the terminal in your office, Director, especially since I’m the one who programmed that system in the first place. An oversight on my part.”

Marie looked like she wanted to reach out and strangle her, and it was only by taking in a deep, calming breath that she managed not to growl when she said, “So you did, then. You’re the one who let them Rayshift in the *middle of the night* for *no reason whatsoever* —”

“*Not* for no reason,” said Da Vinci, holding up a finger. “You see, the four of them came down to my workshop last night...oh, I want to say it was around three o’clock? Mash, of course, seemed much aggrieved about the whole situation, and Ritsuka appeared reluctant to engage in any shenanigans without permission, but Rika and Emperor Nero were quite adamant that it was something which needed to be handled with all due haste, and, well, I didn’t see any harm in giving them a little...hand, if you will.”

Later, I blamed the fact that I was woken up so suddenly and unexpectedly for the fact that I didn’t put the dots together until just then, but when I did, I couldn’t help but to let out a sigh.

“You sent them Christmas shopping, didn’t you?”

Because of course she did.

“What?” Marie demanded flatly.

“Yes, yes, exactly,” said Da Vinci, nodding with a smile. “Another oversight, I think, that it didn’t occur to any of us that we should have done so sooner, but then, our dear *friend* gave us quite a bit to think about, didn’t he? I thought it only appropriate that they should be allowed to rectify that, as an apology for allowing myself to forget it as well.”

“*Without*,” Marie ground out, “asking me?”

“Better to ask forgiveness than permission,” Da Vinci replied liltily.

“That’s not...!” Marie clenched her jaw shut and squeezed her eyes closed, and I could practically hear her counting backwards from ten in her head.

“In all seriousness, Director,” Da Vinci went on, “I thought you deserved your sleep and there was no need to bother you with this. I’m sorry I didn’t get your permission first, but Rika and Nero seemed determined enough that I thought their next stop would be your room if I told them no. My apologies if I overreached my own position.”

“The UN is who we’re going to have to answer to,” Marie said. “Frivolous Rayshifts... *I’m* the one who will have to answer for them!”

“I think they’re going to have bigger concerns than whether or not we stayed strictly on budget,” I told her. “And it’s important to maintain morale. Isn’t that why you let us have that beach vacation after Okeanos?”

“That’s...!” *different*, I could tell she wanted to say, but it died in her mouth and transformed into a sigh. She pinched the bridge of her nose as though to stave off a migraine. Of Da Vinci, she asked, “When exactly are they expected to return?”

“Not too long, not too long,” said Da Vinci. “In fact, I’m expecting to hear from them sometime within the next hour or so. Likely sooner — they’ve already been gone longer than three, after all.”

She let the words hang for a moment, as though waiting, like she was expecting the console to suddenly chime and let her know the others were on their way back. When, several long seconds later, no such thing happened, she let out an awkward chuckle.

“Aha-ha... Of course, no need for the two of you to stick around and wait,” she said. “You may as well go about your day as normal — I’m certain a good breakfast would not go amiss, would it? No need to deprive yourselves! I can handle bringing Rika, Nero, and the others back without your assistance.”

You just want Marie to have a chance to cool down first, I thought wryly, although I was tempted to agree with Marie that this *shouldn’t* have been done without her permission, or failing that, without Romani’s. It was just that Romani likely would have agreed to let them go, too, and even if she didn’t want to admit it, Marie would eventually have let herself be convinced, as well.

I should probably have a talk with Rika when they got back...but there was no way Marie was going to let them go without giving them a dressing down, so I could just be there afterwards to give them that ‘I’m disappointed’ stare Mom had used on me and Emma when we were kids.

“You’re right, Da Vinci,” I said, “we’ll go do that.”

“What?” Marie hissed at me.

I leaned in, placing a gentle hand on her wrist, and murmured to her, “There’s nothing for us to do right now, not unless you have a way of punishing Da Vinci that would actually work.”

She grimaced, squeezing her eyes shut again. Yeah. It wasn’t like we had any Command Spells to use or pay to dock, and frankly, Da Vinci’s work was so integral to the continued functioning of the facility that we couldn’t exactly put more limits on her resources either. The only currency we had with her was mutual respect.

If she was just a little bit more whimsical, that might actually have been scary.

“Fine.” Marie glared at Da Vinci. “But next time, ask permission! I don’t care if you have to wake me up for it, I shouldn’t be finding out about this sort of thing from the logs in my office console!”

“Of course, Director, of course,” Da Vinci promised.

Marie huffed, and then let me pull her gently out of the room. The instant the door whooshed shut behind us, she cursed, “Damn it! After everything that’s happened, don’t they understand how important it is to make sure...!”

“Come on,” I told her quietly. “Let’s go get some breakfast. You’ll feel better after some food and coffee.”

For several long seconds, she didn’t move, and then she whispered, “I just…”

Her hands trembled. I carefully wrapped one of mine around one of hers. “I know. But the twins aren’t Lev. They’re just a couple of teenagers. Teenagers do dumb stuff, sometimes.”

“The fate of the world —”

“— is a heavy thing,” I cut across her softly. “Yell at them about it later, if you want, but I meant what I said about maintaining morale. We can’t all stay cooped up here for the next year without *some* way of releasing the pressure.”

She didn’t have an immediate reply to that, so I pulled away. “Come on. Breakfast first. You can be angry at the twins later, if you still feel like it.”

Marie heaved out a heavy sigh, and she didn’t fight me as I gently led her along. By the time the cafeteria was within sight, her mood seemed to have improved, and she seemed mostly back to normal, or at least enough that none of that fragility and worry was visible on her face or in her posture.

I took that as a good sign that what I’d said had gotten through to her. I think she needed this as much as the twins did, and I was going to have to see about picking something up for her while we were scoping out Jekyll’s apartment for the renovations to Renée’s room.

Once we reached the cafeteria door, I turned to her and said, “I’m going to go and get properly dressed, then I’ll come right back.”

She looked me up and down, taking in the shorts and oversized t-shirt I wore as pajamas, and her lips thinned as she nodded. “Good idea. It may be a lost cause with those technicians in the Command Room, but that’s no excuse not to be presentable.”

Considering she was the one who dragged me out of bed like the world was ending? I decided not to say anything about it, though, and just left her there to return to my room. I hadn’t even had a chance to put my shoes on, and now that I wasn’t hurrying out to find out what had happened, I was suffering for it on the cold tiles.

If I hurried to get back to my room as quickly as I could, well, there wasn’t anyone wandering the halls to see me, so no one could chastise me for it.

When I got back to my room, it was tempting to just climb back into bed and snuggle back up with Jackie, but Marie had only woken me up about half an hour early, so I gave it up and just turned off my alarm, then reached over and shook Jackie awake.

“Time to get up, Jackie.”

She stirred, rolling over and turning her head so she could see me, and she offered me her usual smile. “Good morning, Mommy. Was something wrong?”

Almost against my will, I gave her a smile back. “Good morning, Jackie. A couple of troublemakers decided to sneak out last night, that’s all. The Director was angry because no one asked her permission.”

“Are they in trouble?”

A short laugh huffed out of my nostrils. “Yes, I think they will be.”

As Jackie pulled herself out of bed, I shucked off my pajamas and slipped into a t-shirt and a pair of jeans — not the shirt Da Vinci had delivered yesterday, because that would send entirely the wrong message. I was going to have to move my usual routine into the afternoon to account for the disruption, but that wasn’t a big deal, so I didn’t give it any more thought than that.

Jackie, of course, just needed to pull my shirt up and over her head and manifest her usual gear. Being a Servant really did have its own conveniences like that.

I made sure to grab my communicator before we left, then took Jackie to the cafeteria for breakfast. By now, the decorations had all been taken down or dismissed, and when we stepped in through the automatic door, what greeted us was the bare cafeteria. No more popcorn on strings, no more festive tablecloths, no more lights hanging above the counter where Emiya served the food.

Marie, of course, was already sitting down and nursing a cup of coffee, her breakfast half-eaten, because her mood hadn’t improved much. With the counter clear, however, that meant that Jackie and I could go up and get food right away, and Emiya was already preparing another double-stacked tray as we approached.

“The Director seems to be in a bit of a mood this morning,” he commented.

“You hadn’t heard?” I replied. “Your Master and Nero decided to drag her brother and Mash into some last minute Christmas shopping. In London. At four in the morning.”

Emiya winced. “Ah. And let me guess: no one asked Director Animusphere for permission before they went gallivanting off into a Rayshift.”

“She didn’t find out until she checked the logs on her console this morning.”

He sighed. “Well. I suppose I’ll be in the market for a new Master soon. Could I ask you to pick up another Archer’s contract?”

“I think one is more than enough for me.”

He chuckled. “How heartless! Am I that expendable now that there’s another chef in this kitchen?”

“I wonder.”

Renée paid us a glance, but nothing more than that before she went back to cooking. Emiya finished dishing me up and sent me on my way with his usual, “Enjoy.”

I had barely sat down and portioned out my plate from Jackie's when both my and Marie's communicator's chimed, notifying us of a message from Da Vinci. It read simply:

They're back and heading your way!

That was all the warning we had. Less than ten seconds later, the door whooshed open to admit Nero, dressed in —

“Just what do you think you're wearing?” Marie sputtered, rising from her seat.

— a [Santa Claus outfit](#), complete with a green ribbon tied in a bow at the collar. From the knot of the ribbon hung a sprig of mistletoe and a brassy bell that jingled as she walked.

She ignored Marie completely. “Ho-ho-ho! Merry Christmas! Santa Nero has come to deliver presents!”

When she stepped aside, gesturing behind her, Rika, Ritsuka, and Mash all came in, dressed in similarly themed Christmas wear, only they were designed to look like elves. They carried boxes in their arms, some of them wrapped up, some of them little more than cardboard that had been hastily taped shut and had names scribbled across the front.

They all looked utterly exhausted, although Rika still managed to have some pep in her step and cheer in her smile.

“It's not Christmas anymore!” Marie insisted, slapping her hands against the table. Her silverware clattered on her tray.

“I am emperor and I say it is! Mm-mm!” Nero said stubbornly. “The festive spirit of Christmas must continue on, for I arrived too late to properly enjoy it!”

“You...!”

I laid a gentle hand over one of Marie's, and when she whirled around to face me, I calmly said, “I think — *just this once* — we can allow it. On the understanding, of course,” and I slid a look Rika's way, “that everyone asks for *permission* first, before trying something like this again.”

“R-right!” Rika laughed nervously. “Totally! For sure! W-we'll definitely ask Boss Lady next time we want to do something like this! Promise! Pinky swear!”

I could practically hear Marie's teeth grinding together, but she *did* subside. “As long as we have that understanding.” Her eyes flashed, and she pinned Rika with a glare this time. “But if it happens again, I won't be anywhere near so lenient!”

“G-got it!” Rika squeaked.

“You said something about presents?” I asked mildly.

“Y-yes!” Mash piped up, and she looked over the boxes in her arms, struggling to try and read the names scribbled on them around their bulk. “U-um, we couldn’t get something for everyone, but we *did* manage to find a few things. I-I’m not sure whose we should give first, though...”

“Maybe Renée’s?” Ritsuka suggested. He struggled against a yawn for a moment, then lost, before continuing. “I think hers was the most important present we picked up.”

“An excellent idea, Elf Ritsuka!” Nero declared. “Mm-mm! Renée Flamel, come forward! Santa Nero has a present to deliver to you!”

There was a moment of awkward silence, and then the door to the kitchen opened and Renée walked out. Emiya’s ridiculous aprons had apparently infected her, because on the front of her apron was a cartoonish depiction of an electric mixer with smoking prongs. Beneath it, there was the line, “This kitchen ain’t big enough for the both of us!”

Because of course he had given her something like that.

“A present?” Renée asked.

Nero nodded. “Yes!”

She turned about and reached for the box that looked like it had been most haphazardly prepared, little more than a simple cardboard thing with “To: Renée, From: Santa Nero,” scrawled messily in sharpie on the side. With incongruent care, she lifted it out of Ritsuka’s arms, slowly turned back around, and presented it to Renée.

“Merry Christmas! Ho-ho-ho!”

Renée accepted the box gingerly, and for a moment, stood there, confused. After a few seconds, she asked, “What...am I meant to do with this?”

“Open it!” Rika told her. “Careful, though, it’s fragile!”

So Renée carefully set the box down upon the nearest table, examined it for a second, and then ran a fingernail across the tape holding the box closed. I couldn’t have been the only one whose eyebrows rose when it proved sharp enough to cut through the tape as though it was a finely honed blade.

I guess when Flamel said he’d given her all of his alchemical knowledge, he really had given her all of it.

Slowly and cautiously, Renée peeled back the box’s flaps, and then the wads of tissue paper that had been stuffed in on top, and when she finally saw what was inside of the box, she gasped.

“This is...”

As though lifting the most delicate of glass, she pulled from the box a simple china teacup, rimmed in gold and decorated with floral patterns.

Hold on a second. Weren’t those...?

“Everything else was corrected once the Singularity was resolved,” said Rika, completely serious and gentle, “but when we went back to Doc Jekyll’s apartment, everything that was there before we showed up was still there. Abe didn’t leave anything behind except you, but we figured, if there was one thing there that would mean the most to you, it was that tea set.”

Renée’s fingers curled around the cup, and when she looked back up at Rika, the first open, honest smile I had yet seen graced her face. A pair of lone tears fell from her eyes and down her cheeks.

“Thank you,” she said, voice trembling. “It’s wonderful.”