

Chapter LXX: After Action Reflection

As far as we Masters were concerned, our sojourn into the Septem Singularity's Roman Empire lasted about a week and a half — less than half the time we spent in the Orléans Singularity walking across France — and yet that was more than long enough that my quality of sleep our first night back was much improved. Even our single night's stay at Nero's palace couldn't hope to compare to the comfort of a modern mattress in a climate-controlled room.

Better still, there were no strange dreams to interrupt my rest, no memories of any of my Servants' past intruding in the middle of the night. If I dreamt at all, then by the time I woke up in the morning — an hour later than I usually got up — I had forgotten them completely.

It had not gotten any less sobering to walk through the empty halls of Chaldea's facilities or to go through my morning routine and realize that my fellow Master candidates from Team A were still lying in their coffins, frozen on the precipice of death, but I was finally getting used to it. I hadn't exactly flinched away whenever I went to say something to one of my erstwhile teammates and didn't find them there, if only because I had never gotten particularly close to any of them over the last two years, but some part of me always felt their absence.

More to the point, I'd always felt the weight that absence left behind. The fact that it meant I was now responsible for a job that was originally meant to be carried out by a whole team, left to shoulder the burden of leading two novices through a gauntlet that had essentially claimed the crack squad of experts before we could even get started.

In some ways, it was like leading the Chicago Wards again. In others, it was nothing like that at all.

The Wards, at least, had some level of experience. Even if they weren't quite on my level when I joined them, that wasn't the worst indictment, considering exactly how action-packed my career had been at that point. Barely active a month and I'd already seen more S-Class threats than most capes faced in a lifetime.

Ritsuka and Rika didn't even have the Wards' experience. To be fair, neither did the original Team A, but the original Team A had training and skill sets to offset their lack of experience in actual combat, and the twins — as unkind as it might have been to say it — had essentially been pulled off the street at random.

Despite that, they actually were doing exceptionally well. There were undoubtedly moments where someone with a broader skill set, like Wodime or Ophelia, would have done better, but for all they were missing, Ritsuka and Rika were filling in the gaps with more speed than I expected. They had started the race a mile behind and were quickly catching up.

Was that a reflection of how well I was leading them, or their own ability to adapt?

Those thoughts stayed with me throughout my morning routine, and I was still rolling them over in my head almost an hour later as I sat down to await breakfast in the cafeteria. Emiya had prepared another odd but oddly delicious-looking meal that I had to assume was Japanese, but what its proper name happened to be was beyond me.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Arash asked.

I blinked and was a little irritated that I hadn’t sensed him coming. Sooner rather than later, I was going to have to see about getting that terrarium built so that I didn’t feel half-blind all the time.

“They’re coming along pretty well, don’t you think?”

Arash blinked back at me. “The twins?”

I nodded and continued eating, chewing on my thoughts as much as my food. Predictably, they weren’t up yet, but I didn’t begrudge them a little sleeping in after the day we’d had yesterday. Those fights were all rough.

“It’s only been a couple of months, if you count the time inside the Singularities,” I said, “and look at how far they’ve come.”

“I don’t think you’re in danger of losing your job, if that’s what you’re asking,” said Arash.

A huff of air escaped my nostrils. It might someday have grown up into a proper snort.

“They’ve still got a long way to go, don’t get me wrong,” I told him. “But they’re way better off than they were during Fuyuki.”

“I’ll have to take your word for that,” he said. “I’ve only known them in Orléans and Septem, and they’re still relying on you to carry them forward. But I can see what you mean. Even if they’re not there yet, they *are* learning how to be Masters.” He smiled at me. “They have a good teacher.”

I ducked my head. It wasn’t that I hadn’t ever taught before — hell, I’d taught the twins directly between Orléans and Fuyuki, and I would be again once we’d had a few days to cool off — but I wasn’t sure how much credit I could take for some of the subtler aspects of being a proper Master. It was harder to teach courage and initiative than tactics and strategy, after all.

“They’ll have another one now, too,” I added dryly. “We just brought back Aífe, after all.”

Arash shook his head. “Somehow, I don’t see either of them being quite so excited about that part.”

Neither did I. On the other hand, well... Aífe’s methods might have been extreme by our modern sensibilities, but extreme circumstances required extreme methods. We didn’t have room to spend the amount of time and care that had originally gone into Team A’s training getting the twins up to speed the rest of the way.

My train of thought was derailed when a tall figure in a white coat stumbled into the cafeteria, beelining for the coffee machine, and I blinked at the long, red-haired ponytail as it swished behind him like a pendulum. Back and forth it went, swaying in opposition to his plodding footsteps, like it was a counterbalance keeping him just upright enough that he didn’t fall over.

“Romani?”

He didn't hear me, or at least didn't seem to, and like a zombie, he found a cup and the coffee grinds and set about making some for himself.

"Ugh," he lamented to the open air, "I can't believe I actually slept through the entire mission! And I'm *still* tired, too! Director Animosphere would have kicked my ass if she heard about this!"

My brow furrowed as I watched him, and he grumbled some more, whining about how we "might have needed him," and he "would have been fine, if Da Vinci didn't steal his stimulants," while the coffee machine gurgled and spat out the toxic black sludge that this organization called "coffee."

"Is...he all right?" Arash asked dubiously.

Yeah, I thought, he's just coming down off of a big crash.

Good grief, Romani. You were a doctor. Weren't you supposed to know better than that?

Ignorant of my thoughts, Romani picked up his cup of poison and dumped three spoonfuls of sugar into it, then a splash of cream, and by that point, his cup was so full that it was in danger of spilling over. As though he noticed none of that, Romani did a sort of half-twirl around, noisily slurped from his hot cup of coffee, and nearly planted his face into the floor.

Luckily, Arash was faster and caught him, and he even did Romani the courtesy of steadying his cup of coffee so that it didn't splatter all over the place.

What a swell guy, my inner Lisa chortled.

"Maybe you should take a seat, Director," Arash said pleasantly. He gently escorted Romani into the chair across from me, and Romani only put up a token resistance. "You're no good to anyone if you trip and split your skull open. Work can wait a few minutes more."

Or maybe Arash was being a little more insistent than it looked.

"Acting Director," Romani murmured sulkily. "I'm only *Acting* Director. I'm just holding the seat until Director Animosphere is back and healthy."

"Acting Director, then," Arash agreed smoothly.

Romani sighed and looked down at his cup of coffee, grimaced, and then took another long swig, throat contracting as he gulped it down. It didn't seem to help him much at all.

"It figures that the instant I actually get some real sleep, it knocks me on my behind," he grumbled. His coffee was already half gone. "Da Vinci probably knew exactly what was going to happen, too. That's why she swiped all of my stimulants while I was asleep."

"You'll probably be better off," I told him mildly. "Chugging them down instead of climbing into bed day after day can't be healthy."

"No," he admitted, "but the side effects are manageable, if you take the right doses. And I'm a doctor, so I know all about the right doses."

“Manageable doesn’t mean nonexistent,” I told him. “And you’re an important part of this team, Romani. You need to take care of yourself, too.”

The irony of the fact that it was me saying so didn’t escape me.

He sighed. “Yeah, that sounds like what Da Vinci said, too. I just can’t win when the two of you gang up on me.”

What Lisa would have said just then was wholly and completely justified. “Good. You’re learning.”

Romani pierced me with a flat stare. “You’ve been spending too much time with Da Vinci. She’s rubbing off on you.”

More like my reflective mood made me think about the past a little more than usual, and that came through like this. I didn’t say so aloud. For now, Lisa and all of the friends I left behind were things I didn’t want to share, least of all in the middle of the cafeteria.

Instead, I shrugged. “There are worse influences.”

“I guess there are, aren’t there?”

He shook his head, then looked me up and down with a critical eye.

“Well,” he said, changing the subject, “there weren’t any injury reports waiting for me when I woke up, and you look unharmed to me, so I’m going to assume everyone came through the Singularity okay?”

I thought immediately of Boudica and Spartacus, the two we’d lost at the very end.

“Not everyone,” I told Romani, “but us Masters and Mash were fine, just tired. The last few fights were all back to back to back.”

He blinked. “Back to back to back?” He shook his head. “Wait, I’m missing something here, aren’t I? I thought you just had to worry about Romulus first and foremost.”

“If only it had been that easy,” Arash said ruefully.

“That,” said Romani, “sounds like I’m not going to be happy with what I hear. What did I miss while I was conked out in my bed?”

Arash and I shared a look. “A lot,” he eventually decided on. “Sorry to say, Acting Director, but you missed quite a bit.”

“Like the fact that Emperor Nero was a woman,” I added.

Romani choked, and I was glad I hadn’t waited until he was taking another sip of his coffee, because if I had, I would have been wearing it just then.

“W-wait, what?” he sputtered. “Emperor Nero, a-a woman? How does that work?”

“Da Vinci had a theory,” I said. “Something about, if Nero presented as masculine, then the Romans would record her as male.”

“I...” Romani pinched the bridge of his nose as though to ward off an incoming migraine. “Okay, I can accept that, because I guess I have to, but I get the feeling that’s not the worst part, even if I’d really like it to be. What *else* happened while I was asleep?”

I took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Strictly speaking, this was all stuff I was going to have to put in my after action report anyway, but if I didn’t give him at least the cliff notes version *now*, then he was going to putter about the place, worrying about it until that report was officially filed for him to read.

So I took pity on him.

“Things were going mostly as expected for a while,” I began, “but it was once we investigated Mount Etna that the situation veered wildly...”

So I started off the explanation there: our trip to Etna to get that higher resolution scan and set up Boudica to heal her arm.

“Wait, wait,” Romani said before I could really pick up steam, “Queen Boudica was missing an *arm*? *How*?”

“Right,” I said, “you missed that, too.”

Since he needed the context, I explained that first real fight against Julius Caesar and Tiberius and how Boudica and Spartacus had gone off to fight what turned out to be Marcus Cassius Scaeva.

“H-hang on just a second,” he interrupted me again. “Tiberius? Lucius Tiberius Caesar? As in, the Roman Emperor who kept King Arthur from expanding into the continent? *That* Tiberius?”

“Romani,” I told him flatly, “if you keep flipping out over every minor detail, then it’s going to take all day to get you caught up.”

“The Heroic Spirit who fought King Arthur to a standstill is not a *minor detail*, Taylor!” he protested. “A-and one of Rome’s most famous generals, the man for whom hundreds of later rulers named their titles! He’s not a minor detail either!”

“We beat both of them without suffering any casualties,” *no matter how close it got*, I didn’t say.

“They’re minor enough that I’m not going to give you a play by play of how that fight went down. Now, if I can continue?”

He swallowed whatever he’d been about to say and sourly conceded. “Fine. I guess the more important thing is the fact you all made it through these fights safely, so even if it goes against my instincts, I’ll let it pass.”

“Thank you.”

My explanation continued. I skimmed over a lot of the drama of meeting Nero and the negotiations that went into joining forces with her so that I could move on and pick back up at Etna, where I'd originally started. I mentioned, briefly, our staying the night in Rome, but paid more attention to what Da Vinci's scan had told us.

Romani, predictably, flipped out about Stheno.

"A goddess?" he choked. "An honest-to-goodness *goddess*?"

"We thought it might be Hephaestus, at first," I told him. "The idea of commissioning a weapon from the God of Smithing was...tempting."

"You actually went to investigate a goddess on her own territory?" Romani's voice rose an octave.

I'd already known he wasn't going to be happy about that, and maybe the fact that I'd seen it coming made me more annoyed with the fact that he was getting so upset over it.

"Would it have been better to find out she was an enemy when she attacked us from behind while we were in the middle of fighting Romulus?"

"Neither!" said Romani, rather unreasonably, in my opinion. "Neither is better! What on Earth were you *thinking*, confronting an actual goddess on her home ground? That's a thousand times worse than fighting a mage in his workshop!"

"I was thinking we didn't have much choice," I rebuked him.

"That's not...!" Romani visibly restrained himself, reining in whatever he'd been about to say.

"Obviously, you're here, so you came through that fine, but there are so many ways that could have gone very wrong!"

"We took as many precautions as we could," Arash said diplomatically. "We didn't go rushing in without a plan, Acting Director."

"That's the worst part!" Romani bit back. "Ritsuka or Rika, I could understand. They don't have the training or the experience. But I *know* you know better, Taylor!"

No, the worst part was that he had something of a point, because despite our best efforts and our preparations, Stheno had come closer to beating us with her *voice* than most of our enemies had with swords or fists or Noble Phantasms. In hindsight, we would have been better off forgetting about her and going back to Rome.

That was the thing about hindsight, though. It was useless.

"There weren't any better options," I repeated, if not in so many words. "We needed to know, so we investigated."

Romani sighed and glared miserably down at his half-finished cup of coffee.

“Fine,” he eventually grunted. “Fine! Shouting at you isn’t going to solve anything and it’s already over and done with, so... Keep going, I guess. What *else* happened while I was in bed?”

For the sake of keeping the peace, I skipped over Stheno Mastering us and what had happened there and went straight to staying the night and our plans to go around Hadrian’s Wall. I almost decided not to mention Caligula either, but there was no doubt that Romani was going to be checking my official report later, and with the twins and Mash both having their own reports to write up, I couldn’t just conveniently omit him.

Well, I *could* have, sure, but it involved bullying all three of them into falsifying the records, and I...didn’t really want to do that. For a number of reasons.

Romani’s blood pressure would just have to take another hit.

“As hard as *Heracles*?” Romani echoed, disbelieving. If his eyebrows stayed like that for too long, I was sure he would start getting wrinkles. “Caligula was *that* strong?”

“According to Emiya, yeah,” I said.

“But...” Romani’s face twisted with confusion. “How would he... Servants aren’t supposed to...”

Emiya had never explained how he knew. All things considered, however? It wasn’t that big a stretch to imagine that it was something he experienced when he was alive. After all, El-Melloi II himself had said that he participated in a Grail War when he was younger, and if I was a Master in a proper Grail War, Heracles and King Arthur would have been at the top of my list for who to have on my side.

“I can’t speak for the comparison,” Arash said, “but Caligula was definitely uncommonly strong. It took a concerted effort from the whole team to finally bring him down.”

“I couldn’t confirm it, but he might have been using his Imperial Privilege skill to mimic Battle Continuation,” I added.

Because it was the only thing that made sense to me. The only one who had been harder to put down was Altera, and Caligula hadn’t had the advantage of a Holy Grail to just throw magical energy at his wounds until they healed.

“Please tell me things calmed down after that,” Romani pleaded.

Arash and I shared another look.

Romani closed his eyes, aggrieved. “Of course they didn’t.”

“Like I said earlier,” I told him, “the last three fights were essentially back to back to back. After we beat Caligula, we made our way towards the United Empire’s capital, and we met Jing Ke along the way. She had intelligence reports from Brutus...”

I launched back into the explanation, skimming our plans and our planning stages and going to the battles themselves. Looking back, Romulus really was the easiest of the last three, and that was

saying something, considering who he was and what place he occupied in the hierarchy of Roman Heroic Spirits. Flauros and Altera were much more terrifying challenges, because even compared to Romulus, they were just so much farther above him.

When I got to the part about Lev showing up, Romani's expression changed to somber and solemn.

"Lev was there?"

"Yes," I replied. "It seems, just like with Fuyuki, he was responsible for the presence of the Grail that spawned the Singularity. He took credit for Orléans, too."

Romani grimaced. "So he's somehow moving from time period to time period, and he's doing it without Rayshifting technology. Or could it be that he's copied our systems himself somehow?"

"He mentioned something about being ejected from a temple," I said, "although he didn't really go into any detail about it. Just that he'd been kicked out for letting us screw things up in France."

Romani's brow furrowed. "A temple?" he muttered. "Could it be... But no, that doesn't make any sense, does it?" He focused back on me. "Did he say anything else?"

"Nothing that was particularly helpful," I answered. "And then he transformed."

Romani blinked. "What?"

So I had to explain Flauros, the magical giant tentacle monster, and how we had to fight *him* almost immediately after Romulus. I also had to explain just how utterly bullshit he was as an enemy, and how much effort it took to bring him down, because it really was just more nonsense piled on top of what we'd already had to deal with in the same damn *day*.

When I was done, Romani couldn't do anything but sigh. Like I had exhausted all of his outrage and panic and he'd gone straight to weary.

"That makes three," he said almost desperately, "so that means things were over after that, right?"

I grimaced.

"Taylor," he said with an air of resigned exasperation, "that was the end of it, right? He had the Grail. All you had to do after you defeated him was retrieve it."

If only things really had been that simple.

"We didn't have the chance," I admitted at length. "He used it almost immediately after we beat him to summon another Servant. Attila the Hun."

Romani's head dropped into his hands. The slump of his shoulders told me more than words that he really hadn't gotten enough rest to be back to his best yet.

"You're all okay," he said into his palms. "Everyone made it out. No one was seriously injured. Even if it wasn't easy, you still made it through unscathed."

“We did,” Arash reassured him. “We’re all back, Doctor Roman. Ritsuka, Rika, Taylor, and Mash are all fine.”

Romani leaned back in his chair, letting his head loll back over the back of his chair, and to the ceiling, he said, “That’s the important part, isn’t it? Thanks, Arash. I think I really needed that.”

Arash smiled. “No problem, Acting Director.”

“Do you want me to keep going?” I asked, more for the sake of it than because I actually expected him to want me to.

Romani’s smile as he straightened back up was tighter and less honest than Arash’s. It didn’t reach his eyes. “I really probably should have you tell me the rest, but…” He shook his head. “Sorry, I just don’t have it in me right now. I think this was all a little too much for me to deal with so soon after waking up.”

He sighed and levered himself out of his chair, taking another swig of his coffee. By the expression on his face, it had long gone cold. I’d had far too many mornings like that myself.

“If you’re sure.”

“I’ll read the rest of it in the reports later,” he told me. “I’m sure there’s some things you glossed over anyway, so I’m going to have to if I want to get the clearest picture I can.”

My cheek twitched, but I didn’t give him any other sign of exactly how close he’d hit to home with that one. Romani could be really perceptive, sometimes.

“For now,” he went on, “I’m still Acting Director, which means a lot of paperwork is sitting on my desk that needs sorted through. I’m going to go handle some of that now so that Director Animusphere doesn’t yell at me later for neglecting my duties while she’s gone.”

He gulped down the rest of his coffee like it was alcohol, grimacing at how cold it had gotten, and shook his head as though to dispel the remaining cobwebs.

“Enjoy your breakfast,” he bade me, and then he turned to leave.

“Don’t forget to have some yourself at some point,” I called after him.

“Right, right!” He waved at me from over his shoulder. “You and Da Vinci both, I swear! I’m not that careless, you know!”

You really are, I didn’t say as I watched him go. I’d have to convince Emiya to take him something later on.

As Romani left through one door, heading towards his office, the door on the other side of the rounded room opened, and in walked Mash and the twins. Their heads swiveled towards the other door, and then, seeing me and Arash, they made a beeline over towards us.

“Was that Doctor Roman?” asked Ritsuka.

“It was.”

“Good morning, Mash, Ritsuka, Rika,” said Arash.

Ritsuka blinked and backtracked. “Ah, good morning, Arash, Senpai.”

“Morning,” Rika got out right before she yawned.

“Good morning, Miss Taylor, Arash,” said Mash politely.

“Sleep well?” I asked wryly.

“It was a bed,” Rika said, “with an actual mattress and a soft pillow.”

“And, um, air conditioning?” Ritsuka hazarded.

“Central heating, actually,” I told him. “Antarctica, remember?”

“Right.”

“Whatever,” Rika grouched. “It’s better than sleeping out in the wilderness in the middle of the summer.”

It wasn’t even a contest, I agreed silently. Then again, maybe I was spoiled a bit, being an American girl. I heard some countries didn’t even have a market for air conditioning units, whereas almost every house in the US that wasn’t built a hundred years ago had one.

“You would have been miserable in my time period,” Arash said, amused.

“Modern technology is the beeeeeeeest,” said Rika.

“Did Doctor Roman want something, Miss Taylor?” asked Mash, curious.

“To catch up on what he missed,” I answered. “I gave him an abbreviated rundown of what happened after he went to take a nap.”

Mash looked towards the door Romani had left through. She mumbled, “He didn’t look happy.”

“He wasn’t.”

He was a dedicated physician with a soft heart being forced to send the girl he had essentially raised into a combat zone against the kinds of forces that had a reputation for routing entire armies. Even if I thought he needed to do a better job filling the shoes he was currently in, I could at least acknowledge the difficulty of his position.

We just couldn’t afford to cut him any slack about it.

“Did we do something wrong?” asked Mash.

I grimaced. How to answer that question? Strictly speaking, the answer was no. We'd done our best in the Septem Singularity with the information we'd had at the time, and while I could acknowledge that there were things we could have done better in hindsight, it was like I'd already thought earlier: hindsight was useless. The best decisions were *always* more obvious in hindsight.

"Hell no," said Rika. "We kicked ass! And took some names, while we were at it!"

"Did we?" Ritsuka asked quietly. "I... All of those people in the United Empire's capital..."

Ah. He was still thinking about that, was he?

"We did the best we could," I told him. "Sometimes, the only thing you can do is survive."

Ritsuka scowled. "Survive, huh..."

"You won't win every battle," Arash took over for me. "Even if you try your hardest and do your best, there's always going to be times where someone gets the best of you or catches you by surprise. Even if you don't win those fights, the only way you really lose is if you die." He pressed a hand to his chest. "And as Servants, it's our job to make sure that we always die before you Masters do."

Ritsuka's hands clenched. "I don't," he said vehemently, "want *anyone* dying for me!"

"That's a call you might have to make some day," I told him bluntly.

"Miss Taylor!" Mash gasped.

"No, she's right," said Arash. "Let her talk."

"You two have been doing pretty well," I said. "You're not there yet, but you've been getting better at this job. Even if you made a few mistakes and missed a few opportunities during Septem, you're a lot better than you were at the beginning of Fuyuki."

Neither of them looked happy to hear me say so. I think they both sensed the "but" coming.

"But what would you have done," I began, "if you had to choose between saving a Servant like Boudica and an important historical figure like Nero?"

Both of them recoiled. Rika was the first one to regain her bearings.

"W-well," she answered with false bravado, "I would have saved them both, of course!"

"You can't," I said. "You only have time for one. You can cast a Momentary Reinforcement so Boudica has the strength to throw Nero to safety, or you can cast an Emergency Evasion so that Boudica herself can make it to safety. You have to choose which one is going to live and which is going to die."

"Miss Taylor," mumbled Mash, "is that what...?"

I acted like she hadn't said anything at all.

“You have to choose. So which one do you save?”

The twins looked at each other, uncertain and unnerved, and then they seemed to carry out a silent conversation comprised entirely of different facial expressions and swift, jerky hand movements, and as they did, I watched their postures change, their stances firm up, and their minds solidify on a course of action.

When they turned back to me, they'd made a decision, and their faces were determined and strong.

“We don't choose either one,” said Ritsuka.

“We save them both,” Rika added.

“Together,” they chorused.

“She casts a Momentary Reinforcement, so Boudica has the strength to carry Nero fast enough,” said Ritsuka.

“And he casts Emergency Evasion, so they can make it to safety,” said Rika.

I smiled, and it seemed to unnerve them, because they were suddenly less sure of their decision.

“So why didn't you?”

And just like that, their confidence evaporated. I felt a little mean to have to burst their bubble like that, but there wasn't room in this job for coddling them.

“This is what I mean,” I went on. “It's all fine when you two can work together and be on the same wavelength. You'll get better at that as we go. But you won't always have that option, and you won't always be able to coordinate the “best” solution. There are going to be times when the only thing you can do is choose the least bad of a crop of terrible options.”

Speaking as someone who was very familiar with having to do just that.

“Our lives are the most important ones in this entire facility,” I told them. “Without us, Chaldea doesn't function. The world ends. Mankind goes extinct. That's why you have to be prepared, if it comes down to it, to sacrifice a Servant's life to save your own.”

“We're all prepared for it,” Arash added. “Every single one of us. We already know the score.” He nodded towards Mash. “Even Mash.”

The twins' heads whipped around towards her, so fast I wasn't sure I hadn't heard them crack, and Mash looked alarmed to suddenly be the center of attention.

“Every time she holds up her shield, she knows she might not make it,” said Arash. “Every time she throws herself in front of you to block an attack, she knows it might kill her. She does it anyway, because she also understands what it means to be a Servant.”

His hand landed on my shoulder. “And each and every one of us is trusting you, as our Masters, to know when and where to spend our lives best. We’re trusting you to carry the weight of that decision and not to make it lightly. That is what it means to be a Heroic Spirit. That’s what it means to be a Servant.”

The twins looked...overwhelmed. Like they had too much dumped on them all at once, and in hindsight, maybe they had. This was a really heavy conversation to be having before we’d even eaten breakfast.

Perhaps Arash could sense this, because he disarmed them with a smile and said, “In the meantime, we’ll support the three of you to the best of our abilities. So feel free to rely on us when you need to, okay?”

“If you’re done scarring my poor Master for life,” a familiar baritone drawled.

“Emiya!” Rika squeaked.

A white eyebrow raised over a steely gray eye, and Emiya set down a tray of steaming food in front of Rika. I didn’t recognize what it was, only that it was some kind of eggs and rice dish, which meant that it was probably Japanese.

“I could sense the atmosphere from the kitchen,” Emiya continued, “and I thought, my, wouldn’t my Master appreciate it if I brought her something scrumptious and delicious to eat? After all, I’m her house-husband, aren’t I?”

“You’re goddamn right!” Rika agreed enthusiastically, thoroughly distracted from our previous conversation.

I arched an eyebrow of my own at Emiya, and he merely smirked back at me. He was well aware of what he’d just done.

“And since we didn’t get to have our celebratory dinner last night,” he kept going demurely, “it seemed only appropriate that I cooked a breakfast fit for an empress, or else my Master might get mad at me.”

You really are milking this just a little too much, I thought at him. Unfortunately, he wasn’t my Servant, so I couldn’t communicate telepathically with him. He seemed to catch on either way.

“Well, it doesn’t seem fair that Master is the only one who gets to eat so richly,” he said slyly. “Shall I go and get food for everyone else, as well?”

“Yeah, sure,” said Rika flippantly. She only had eyes for her meal as she broke apart the pair of chopsticks Emiya had provided to go with her food. “Go ahead.”

Emiya inclined his head like a waiter at a fancy restaurant. “As you say.”

“It really does look pretty good,” Ritsuka commented as Emiya left back towards the kitchen.

“It’s Emiya, Onii-chan,” said Rika. “Of course it’s good!”

“Is this another Japanese recipe?” Mash asked curiously. “I don’t think I’ve seen something like this before.”

“Just wait until you try it, Mash!” Rika said brightly. “You’re gonna love it! Promise!”

A minute later, Emiya returned with two more trays, one for Mash and one for Ritsuka, and he slid me a glance as he went back for mine that was almost like a threat. Like, *don’t ruin this for them, got it?* If he weren’t still wearing that ridiculous apron of his, I might actually have been intimidated.

My stomach gurgled to let me know that *I* still hadn’t eaten yet, either.

Well, so I wouldn’t coddle them. That didn’t mean I couldn’t let them have moments of respite like this.