

Chapter CXIII: Return of the Red Hound

Mash's first swimming lesson went — as Alec or Aisha might have put it — swimmingly.

It was not, having said that, without issue. Marie was a bit stilted and awkward for most of the time, like she didn't quite know how to properly interact with Mash, especially outside of her role as Director of Chaldea to Mash's subordinate position. It was undoubtedly made worse by her complicated feelings on the matter of what her father had done to Mash, because those would not be resolved simply by me commanding them to be resolved.

If only it really could be that simple.

It left me to pick up most of the slack, and for the time being, I was okay with that. We weren't going to be teaching Mash all she needed to know in a single afternoon, and Mash wouldn't be mastering any of it that quickly either. There was still plenty of time to work things out and get them both to a better place. Plenty more afternoons to help Marie work through her guilt.

Two birds with one stone. My favorite kind of plan.

The first thing I made sure to teach Mash was treading water, just because it was probably the most important skill to have when it came to swimming, doubly so when she would probably have that armor of hers on whenever the time came that she might need this. Everything else could come later, once she knew how to just keep herself afloat.

Like that, the hours slipped by. Somewhere along the way, I felt the prickle of attention on the back of my neck, and I knew without even looking that Fou had decided to poke his nose in to watch. I ignored him as best as I was able, but the one time I chanced a glance over in his direction, he had on an oversized jersey that said "LIFEGUARD" in bold, white lettering and a shiny black whistle hung from a string around his neck.

I should have known better. The little gremlin was never too far from Mash, and while he seemed to like the twins well enough, too, I doubted he found their lessons with El-Melloi II particularly interesting. It was practically inevitable that he would follow her here to her swimming lessons instead.

Although where he got the jersey, I hadn't the slightest clue. Maybe one of the deceased staff had a pet dog or something and Fou had gotten into the luggage while poking around the empty rooms? That sounded like a stretch. Marie had a general "no pets" policy, and I had a hard time imagining a stuffy mage would go through the trouble of outfitting a familiar with something so banal. Romani or Da Vinci, on the other hand, I could easily see them getting something like that for Fou — or, in Da Vinci's case, making it for him herself.

That was already more attention than I wanted to give the thing, though, so I put it out of my mind for the time being. The more energy I spent trying to figure out the thing's mystery, the more of a headache I gave myself.

Eventually, the alarm I set before we started rang, signaling to me that we had an hour before dinner hours were supposed to begin, so I called an end to our lesson for the day so that we could all go and get cleaned up before we went to eat.

Once we had all climbed out of the pool and toweled ourselves dry as best as we could, I turned to Mash.

“We’ll pick this up at the same time tomorrow,” I promised her. “For now, go ahead back to your room and get ready for dinner. We’ll meet the twins in the cafeteria.”

“Okay!” Mash said brightly, as though she hadn’t just spent an afternoon learning to swim. “Thank you for the lesson, Miss Taylor! You as well, Director! I learned a lot today!”

She gave me a short bow, and then, she turned and left. Fou blew his little whistle sharply, and then bounded after her, chirping, “Fou, fou!”

A moment later, they were both gone, and it was just Marie and me, alone by the pool. She meandered over towards me, her eyes still drawn to the hallway that Mash had just walked down, a slight tremble in her hand and a little wobble in her bottom lip the only signs of what must have been going through her head. The slosh of the pool and the hum of the motors circulating the water filled up the silence.

“I’m proud of you for coming today,” I told her quietly.

Her brow furrowed, troubled.

“It doesn’t…”

She struggled to find the words, floundering as her lips moved soundlessly.

“I know.”

But I understood what she was trying to say anyway. Even if today had gone well, even if Mash had never at any point given a single hint saying that she held anything Marisbury had done against Marie, even if the only one who was forcing Marie to shoulder the blame was herself, a single lesson over the course of one afternoon wasn’t enough to soothe her conscience. It wasn’t that easy. It couldn’t be changed that quickly.

And again, I was well aware of that. I’d known from the very beginning that this was the work of many long hours over the course of weeks or months.

I reached down and gave Marie’s hand a quick squeeze.

“But you came anyway. And that means something, even if it might not feel like it.”

She didn’t look entirely convinced. That was fine, too. Even if she didn’t quite believe that this would help anyone, let alone her, as long as she was willing to try, that was what was important.

I let go. “Come on,” I said. “What I said doesn’t just apply to Mash. You and I both need to clean up before dinner, too, unless you want to walk into the cafeteria smelling like chlorine.”

Marie shook her head. “You’re right,” she said. “Even if it’s inevitable that everyone will find out about these lessons, I refuse to suffer the indignity of everyone talking about how badly I smell afterwards!”

She stalked off, and smothering a little smile, I followed after her.

In the locker rooms, we took a minute to rinse off the worst of the pool water, then changed back into our normal clothes and went our separate ways — her to take another, more thorough shower in her own quarters, and me to do the same in mine. If they weren’t already done, the twins should have been finishing up their lesson with El-Melloi II right around that time, but I didn’t run into either of them on my way back to the Masters’ dorms.

By the time I made it back to my room, showered more thoroughly to get rid of the lingering scent that seemed stuffed up my nostrils, gone through my usual hair care routine (the one part of my appearance I put great effort into caring for, and probably always would), dried off, and gotten dressed again, the dinner hours were starting. After a quick check to see if Da Vinci had left me any messages (she hadn’t), I left and made my way towards the cafeteria for my next meal.

I wound up being one of the first ones there, right as Marcus started doling out the dinner menu, which meant that I was probably the first person to realize exactly how tired he looked.

“Trouble sleeping?” I asked him conversationally.

It occurred to me that I hadn’t made much effort to socialize with the rest of the staff, not even since the Sabotage. Even Sylvia and I were more acquaintances than anything else, colleagues who happened to have disciplines that crossed over to varying degrees. I couldn’t even have said what her favorite color was.

Some of that probably had to do with how busy everyone was keeping this place going. Twenty-ish people were trying to do the job of two-hundred, and that had to be spreading everyone thin. I had to wonder how many of those stimulants Romani had been handing out to the others on the staff instead of just using for himself.

“More like too much to do,” Marcus said wearily. “I was just supposed to be helping out in the kitchen part time, but Emiya biting it when he did meant the only one who could do his job was me.”

I made a noise of understanding in my throat. Yeah, that was about what I’d expected.

“You won’t be at it too much longer,” I promised him. “We have plans to bring Emiya back as soon as possible.”

Marcus smiled a tired smile. “The only thing that’s keeping me going.”

I felt a little bad as he dished me up, knowing that I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from comparing it to Emiya’s food, and that wasn’t fair. He probably knew everyone was doing that, too, and it couldn’t have made doing his job here any easier.

As though to prove a point to myself, when I sat down and started eating, I made sure to eat slower than normal, to take in the flavors, to savor them, to appreciate Marcus and his efforts to provide us with something that tasted good, even if it couldn't compare with Emiya's. And still, I couldn't help myself from being slightly disappointed when I found it missing something indescribable, an extra dimension that just set Emiya's meals apart.

Forget losing him again at some point, which may have been inevitable. It was going to be nearly impossible to go back to eating anything else when this was all over and my job as Master of Chaldea was finished.

Slowly, as the dinner hour stretched on, others began to filter in. Marie came first, as poised as she always tried to be in public, and accepted her food without comment. She decided to sit down with me, plopping into the chair directly across from me, and went about eating her food with a sour look on her face that spoke as clearly about her own disappointment as anything else could have. She gave her tray a glare that seemed to accuse it of insulting her taste buds.

At some point, I think I was going to have to do something nice for Marcus. Maybe, once I got my terrarium or Da Vinci came through on those spider puppets, I could weave him a silk apron to wear.

Eventually, the twins arrived, too, with Mash in tow (and the little gremlin perched atop her shoulder, as he seemed perpetually to be), and loaded themselves up with their own food, then came to sit down with Marie and me. They didn't say anything to anyone about it, but just from the way they ate and how unenthusiastic they were, they had the same opinions everyone else seemed to have — Emiya's food was just better.

Rika especially was bummed out. She ate mechanically, distracted, to the point I wasn't sure she was even tasting what she was putting in her mouth. I knew why, of course, but there still hadn't been any word from Da Vinci.

As though that thought had given Rika her cue, she turned to Marie and said, "Hey, Boss Lady."

Marie turned back to her and favored her with a supremely unimpressed look. Rika soldiered on as though she hadn't noticed it.

"Did Da Vinci-chan say anything about getting Emiya back? That was supposed to be today, right? I was promised my house husband back!"

Marie scowled, but made sure — deliberately — to swallow her food before speaking.

"It's not that easy to do a summoning, you know," she said. "There's a lot of preparation that goes into making sure the system is functioning properly, and no one wants to take any chances that this one in particular is going to go awry!"

"But I thought it was supposed to be easier to bring back guys we already summoned!" Rika protested.

"It is!" Marie jabbed her fork at Rika like it was her index finger. "But easier isn't the same as easy! Plus, this is the first time we're going to be summoning back a Servant we already had a contract

with, so there's a lot of things that we need to get straight so that we can make it even easier the next time! Calculations, calibrations, parameters — there's more than you can imagine that goes into ensuring the optimal result!"

"Next time?" said Ritsuka. "You think we're going to lose more Servants in the future?"

"Senpai," Mash murmured sympathetically.

Marie's lips pursed. "It's not like I like the idea any better than you do, but thinking that there won't be another circumstance where one or more of our Servants is defeated is just naive. Even if we miraculously make it through this without losing anyone ever again, it's better to be prepared just in case."

Ritsuka's fist clenched around his silverware. "Then we'll just have to make sure that we get good enough that it never happens again!"

Mash smiled and nodded her head. "Right, Senpai!"

"Fou, fou!"

Marie looked like she had something she wanted to say to that, but rather than let her rain on their parade, I gave her a gentle kick in the shin under the table, and when she hissed and turned to me, I cocked an eyebrow at her. Her mouth drew tight, but she relented and let the matter drop.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spied Rika's troubled expression. Her thoughts about Emiya — about her worthiness as his Master — were written across her face, and although I'd done my best to comfort her in Okeanos, I think it wouldn't be until Emiya himself said so that she'd believe me.

Dinner passed. One after another, more people came in and picked up their own trays from Marcus, sitting down to eat in solitary numbers. Even after we had all finished with our food and most of those who weren't either asleep or on duty had come and gone, we sat around the table, with the exception of Marie, who left almost as soon as she was done. None of us had any other obligations, and I was pretty sure the twins were too anxious about when the call would come from Da Vinci for us to join her in the Summoning Chamber to go off and find something to relax to.

Maybe my presence there comforted them. Just the knowledge that I was there waiting with them. Sometimes, I guess, that was all it took to make you feel better.

Eventually, Arash and Bradamante decided to join us, or maybe they'd been there the entire time and just felt like they needed to ease some of the tension out of the group.

"Hey," Arash said as he sat down beside me. "Waiting to get the call?"

"Good evening, everyone!" Bradamante said as she sat down in Marie's vacated seat.

"Tii-chan!" said Rika, but it lacked a little bit of her usual cheer.

"Is today another Servant meal day?" Mash asked.

“Not yet.” Arash smiled a little sadly. “And even if it was, I don’t think most of us would be taking the chance to make use of it.”

“Sir Emiya’s food really was exceptional,” Bradamante lamented. My cheek twitched as the others’ expressions fell.

“Which is why we’re all looking forward to having him back,” Arash added, looking pointedly in Bradamante’s direction. “Right?”

She blinked, bemused. “O-of course! A-ah, Master, I didn’t mean to imply otherwise! Everyone is looking forward to having Sir Emiya back amongst us! Not just for the good food either!”

“Although that certainly doesn’t hurt,” Arash joked.

“It’s all right,” said Ritsuka with a wan smile. “We all know you didn’t mean anything bad, Bradamante. It’s just...”

He trailed off, so I finished for him:

“Taking losses is never easy.”

He looked down at the table. The hand resting atop it curled and clenched into a fist.

“It isn’t,” he agreed. “Queen Marie and Mozart in Orléans, Spartacus and Boudica in Septem, and then Emiya in Okeanos...”

“We were incredibly lucky,” Mash said softly. “That we only had a single casualty in Okeanos, and against a foe like Herakles or Caenis... But that still doesn’t change the fact that we lost someone.”

“Because we just weren’t good enough,” Ritsuka said bitterly.

All of the blood left Rika’s face, and she looked like she had just taken a punch to the gut by a heavyweight boxing champion.

“That’s not true!” Bradamante insisted immediately.

“Isn’t it?” Ritsuka demanded. “In Orléans, we didn’t have Siegfried with us to kill Fafnir, so Queen Marie had to sacrifice herself so we could escape.” Bradamante flinched. “Mozart died because we didn’t react to Jeanne Alter’s Noble Phantasm fast enough. Spartacus and Boudica, if we’d just been faster or smarter or better Masters —”

“And if the Director had never trusted Lev Lainur, then the Sabotage would never have happened, and Team A would get to make all of those mistakes instead of you,” I interrupted him.

“That’s not...!” he tried to protest.

“Isn’t it?” I asked him calmly. “All of the answers are obvious in hindsight, Ritsuka. When you look back with all of the hard won knowledge your experience got you, the right choice seems so much easier, doesn’t it?”

I, better than most of those sitting at that table, knew that all too well. How easy it was to look back and say you should have done things differently. To realize you'd given power to people who had only used it to hurt you, to realize you'd given power to those who had already hurt you, just in the way you reacted to them.

"But that's not how it works," I went on. "You do the best with what you have in the moment. Whether that decision was right or wrong is something you can only think about after everything else is said and done."

Rika had a funny look on her face, but Ritsuka looked like he didn't like that answer at all. Like he couldn't accept it.

"Sometimes bad things happen," Rika muttered, "and there's nothing you can do about it."

Her brother grimaced and looked very much like he wanted to say something particularly mean, but managed to hold himself back. "Hakuna Matata isn't the answer to every problem, Rika," he said tersely.

"Maybe not," Rika allowed quietly, "but... Isn't it enough that we tried our best?"

"And what if our best isn't good enough?" he shot back, and rather than rise back up against it, Rika wilted.

"Then you get better," I told him, and the words seemed almost to cause him physical pain. Rika looked over at me. "You get better, and you learn from your mistakes, and the next time you make one, you learn from that, too. You learn from your enemies, you learn from your friends, and you keep learning and keep getting better so that you don't make as many mistakes as you did the last time."

Déjà vu. Hadn't I just had a conversation like this with Rika a couple days ago?

"And eventually, you stop making mistakes?" he challenged.

If only.

"No. You just make different ones. And then you learn from those, too."

That didn't seem to be the answer he was expecting from me, but it didn't seem to satisfy him either. I think he might have been expecting me to claim that you eventually got good enough you never made mistakes, but...had he really not noticed any of mine?

"No one is expecting you to be perfect, Ritsuka," Arash said kindly. "You're only human. All of you, and even Mash. And if even the gods couldn't manage to do things right every time, why would any of us expect it out of you?"

"I think you've been an excellent Master so far!" Bradamante put in enthusiastically. "M-maybe, um, not the most...experienced, but excellent nonetheless!"

Ritsuka didn't look entirely convinced, doubt etched into every line of his face, and then Mash set her hand gently atop his clenched fist.

"I didn't choose you because you were the most experienced Master, Senpai," she told him. "I chose you because...you two, the both of you tried to help me while I was crushed underneath that pillar, and you stayed with me even though it might have meant dying yourselves. Because you both took my hands that day... That is why I chose you to be my Masters."

Ritsuka blinked and looked down at her hand, and slowly, he let his fist unfurl so he could take her hand in his. He gave her a grateful smile. "Thank you, Mash. I'm sorry I let myself forget."

"Fou, fou! Fou-kyuu-fou fou!" the little gremlin chirped. Mash giggled.

"I think Fou is trying to say, 'make sure you don't forget it again!' Or something like that."

Ritsuka laughed a little. "Of course."

"Oh my god, you two make me sick," said Rika. "I'm getting diabetes over here! Diabetes, I swear!"

Both Mash and Ritsuka's faces flushed a bright red, and they pulled their hands apart as though a fire had suddenly sprung up between their fingers.

"She was talking to you, too, you know!" Ritsuka said.

"Sure," said Rika. "But I don't swing the sapphic way, so our relationship is entirely platonic. *You*, on the other hand..."

Mash's face grew progressively redder, and even the tips of her ears were turning an interesting shade of pink.

"How do you even *know* that word...?" Ritsuka complained.

I was kind of wondering that myself. At this point, however, I wasn't sure I could put anything past Rika. She definitely wasn't as airheaded as her behavior sometimes made her seem.

"Arash," Bradamante whispered, so low that I almost couldn't hear it, "do you really think...Mash and Lord Ritsuka...?"

Arash chuckled lowly. "Who knows?"

At that moment, as though to relieve the tension that was building up inside of the room, all four of our communicators beeped to let us know we had a message. *Impeccable timing, Da Vinci*, I thought when I found her name on the sender's line.

Let's bring our friend back, shall we? was all the message said, with a brief script underneath that read, *Come to the Summoning Chamber at your earliest convenience.*

At our earliest convenience, she said. As though she wasn't well aware that we'd been waiting on word about this for the entirety of the day. Trust Da Vinci to be coy about even the most serious of subjects.

I could tell the instant Rika finished reading her own message by the sharp gasp she drew in, as well as the fact that she shot up out of her chair immediately afterwards as though her seat had suddenly caught fire.

"What are we waiting for?" she demanded eagerly. "Let's go!"

"Rika!" her brother called out to her, but she was already racing towards the door, and it fell on deaf ears.

"Well," said Arash wryly, "I guess there's no reason to put it off, is there?"

"No!" Mash agreed, and she stood up, too, only she took the time to politely push her chair in before she took off on Rika's tail. "Senpai! Wait for us!"

"Mash!" Ritsuka cried, but he didn't wait any longer to stand up and follow them either.

"Master!" Bradamante said. "Wait for me!"

Instead of standing, she just took spirit form, and an instant later, reappeared, already running after them — or, well, jogging, I suppose, since if she really tried, she would have outpaced them all. It left me alone with Arash, and I could only sigh. He smiled at me.

"Might as well join them, right?"

"Might as well," I allowed, and I climbed up out of my seat, too.

We followed a little more sedately. I would be a liar if I said I wasn't almost as eager as the twins to see Emiya brought back to us, for a multitude of reasons, and Rika's mental health wasn't far from the top of the list. Putting aside his culinary skills, and those weren't a small consideration on their own, he was a hero of the modern era who had managed to take off several of Herakles' lives all on his own, and he had access to a Reality Marble. Quite aside the power of such a thing, the very way we'd used it against Herakles had proved that it was also capable of removing enemies from the field if we had no other way of beating them.

He really was one of the best possible heroes we could have summoned, especially so early into our mission. The sheer number of problems he solved on his own... Things would have been quite a bit rougher on us without him.

I made my way out of the cafeteria and through the hallways at a brisk walk. I knew, the instant she heard they'd been running in the hallways, Marie would have some choice words for the twins. I neither wanted to hear her chew them out nor get chewed out for the same thing myself, so I took quick strides but never anything more than that.

"Not going to run after them?" asked Arash as he kept pace with me.

“The Command Room is closer to the Summoning Chamber than the cafeteria is,” I explained briefly. “The Director will make it there before any of them, and if I time it right, she’ll be done scolding them by the time we get there ourselves.”

He laughed. “Smart!”

The hallways were almost entirely empty as we walked them, still just as brightly lit as they had been when we woke up this morning, just as brightly lit as they were all day every day. We saw only one other person who passed us as we went, head bent down over a tablet as she took her work with her. Octavia, I think her name was. The few times I’d run into her, it was often coming from or going to Da Vinci’s workshop.

Maybe it was about time I really started to get to know these people.

True to my prediction, when the door to the Summoning Chamber whooshed open, Marie stood there near the platform where the array was centered, scowling thunderously and slightly red in the face. Ritsuka, Bradamante, and Mash looked appropriately chagrined, having just received a scolding, but Rika looked like whatever Marie had said went in one ear and out the other.

“Ah!” said Da Vinci, who was the first to notice me. “There you are! Although I suppose your presence wasn’t strictly necessary for this operation, was it?”

“I take it I didn’t miss anything important?” I asked, dry as bone.

Da Vinci smiled. “Just the Director informing three naughty children about the rules regarding running in the corridors.”

“It’s a safety hazard!” Marie said defensively. “It might not be as large a concern with our numbers so reduced, but it’s a matter of principle! And it still isn’t safe to go running off everywhere!”

“But Emiya!” Rika protested as though this was itself a compelling argument.

“No need to fret, no need to fret,” said Da Vinci. “We should go over the procedure just to make sure we’re all aware of how this will work, yes?”

Rika crossed her arms and huffed petulantly.

“It will only take a minute or so,” Da Vinci reassured her. “Now, summoning back a Servant whose Saint Graph is already recorded in the FATE System is a little different from summoning randomly or attempting to summon a specific Servant who hasn’t been registered, but the basics of the ritual are essentially the same on your end, Rika.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Rika demanded.

“A little clarification,” Da Vinci answered. “You see, while we were making the preparations to bring back Emiya, the Director, the Vice Director, and I all discussed any...changes we might want to make to Emiya’s contract.”

“Changes?” Ritsuka was the one to ask.

“Whether or not to adjust it so it was split between the three of you,” Marie said bluntly.

Rika *flinched*, like someone had just slapped her in the face.

“We decided against it, eventually,” said Da Vinci. “We had several reasons, but ultimately, the most important one was that we couldn’t be entirely sure how it might affect the summoning if we made tweaks like that. Better to play things on the safe side, yes? We want there to be as few risks as possible, especially after our last attempt got us... Well, Jeanne Alter.”

Marie grumbled something about “that jerk from Fuyuki” under her breath, but I couldn’t quite make it out.

“To that end,” Da Vinci went on, “we’ll also be utilizing a familiar resource to tip the odds further into our favor.”

And she produced a familiar glittering crystal, light refracting like a rainbow through its many facets.

“Saint Quartz!” Ritsuka gasped.

I could almost hear the gnashing of Marie’s teeth as she choked down whatever it was she wanted to say.

“Just so,” said Da Vinci. “The system is already set up so that the data from Emiya’s Saint Graph is loaded into the matrix — speaking of, Meunière, you’ve finished with that, right?”

“Ages ago,” the pudgy, blond technician behind the console replied a little shortly.

Da Vinci nodded and smiled at Rika. “So all that’s left is for our star of the show to step forward and call our friend back!”

She held out the Saint Quartz in offering.

“Ready to bring your house husband back?”

Rika snatched the Saint Quartz from Da Vinci’s hand without a second’s hesitation.

“You bet your shapely behind!”

“Shapely?” Marie sputtered incredulously.

Rika ignored her and stepped towards the summoning array, walking over to the platform upon which it sat, and only then did she hesitate, pausing a second in front of it. In her hand, she rolled the glimmering Saint Quartz around nervously, casting different colors through her fingers and over her arm.

“Well?” Marie demanded.

It seemed enough to steel Rika’s resolve, because she stepped forward and set the Saint Quartz in the middle of the array.

“Fortunately,” Da Vinci told us as an aside, “since Emiya’s Saint Graph is already stored and he already answered our summoning before, we won’t need Mash’s shield to act as a cornerstone for the ritual. Saint Quartz will be enough to form the backbone of his Spirit Origin, and the FATE System can fill in the gaps.”

Rika stepped back over to the dais in front of the array, paused again, fidgeting, and looked over at Da Vinci.

“So I just...say the incantation, right?”

“That’s right,” said Da Vinci patiently. “Just like a normal summoning, Rika. You don’t have to do anything special or unusual. It’s just like the last few times.”

Rika nodded, turned back around, took a deep, shuddering breath, and threw her hand out.

“H-heed my words!” she began, and if anyone else noticed the slight hitch in her voice, no one said anything about it. “My will creates your body, and your sword creates my destiny!”

Like a lightswitch being flipped, the array in front of her began to glow with a bright, pale blue light. It refracted through the Saint Quartz sitting at the center, casting an array of colors about the room and painting the ceiling and walls in rainbow splotches.

“If thou accedes to this will and reason, then answer me!”

A phantom twin of the array lifted off the floor and into the air, searing a trio of afterimages into my eyes.

“I hereby swear that I will embody all the good in this world and punish all its evils!”

And the glowing circle spun, throwing out wind and letting off a whine like a drill boring through steel.

“Thou the Seventh Heaven, clad in three great words of power!”

The light of the circle sparked, flickering from blue to brilliant gold, and at the center, a shadow lifted off the ground, forming the vague silhouette of a man. A shrill beep from Meunière’s console was drowned out by the noise and went unnoticed by everyone else.

“Come forth from the Ring of Deterrence, Guardian of the Heavenly Scales!”

The wind surged, and the spinning ring of light imploded, falling inwards towards the shadow. The silhouette gained color and form — black and red clothing, familiar bronze skin, the shock of white hair on his head.

Emiya smirked and raised a hand in casual greeting.

“Yo!” he said. “Looks like I died. Sorry about that, Master.”

“Emiya!”

Half the room shouted it, but Rika's was the loudest as she leapt over the lip of the dais and threw herself into his chest.

"Oof!" Emiya blinked, looking down at her. "Guess you must have missed my food pretty badly, huh?"

"It worked!" Mash cried happily.

"Welcome back, Sir Emiya!" Bradamante cheered.

"You jerk!" Rika shouted into his chest.

Emiya cast his eyes about the room, confused. "Well, I'm not seeing any new faces, so I can't have been gone all that long. Since we're back at Chaldea, I'm guessing you guys managed to finish solving the Okeanos Singularity without me?"

"Just yesterday, in fact," said Da Vinci. "I think Rika would have mutinied if we didn't bring you back as soon as we could."

"Goddamn right!"

Emiya sighed and patted Rika's back awkwardly. "I see. That's good, at least. Although I have to admit, I'm feeling a little embarrassed. I never would have thought Hektor would be good enough to actually kill one of us, considering how much firepower we had to throw at him."

The room froze. Every smile began to fall as the implications of what he'd just said made it through all of our heads.

He thought Hektor had killed him? Had the summoning messed up and jumbled his memories, or...did he just not remember the battle at all? Meeting Jason, the fight against Herakles, him holding Herakles off while we tried to take down Jason?

Slowly, Rika pulled away from him, stricken. "You...don't remember what happened?"

"Ah. Yes." Da Vinci sighed. "I was afraid this would be the case."

And that said more about the situation than anything else ever could have.

"Amnesia," I asked, "or...?"

"Before I say anything, Emiya," said Da Vinci, "if you would tell us the last thing you remember?"

Emiya grimaced. "We were talking with Medea about what to expect from Jason. How she'd ripped herself out of her other self's Saint Graph, and that was why she was so weakened. Romani called to say something about not taking any deals from King David, and then..."

He shrugged and shook his head.

Da Vinci let out a breath. "I see. That's what I thought."

Marie clicked her tongue, scowling. “Even the FATE System isn’t without flaws, is that it?”

“Director?” Mash asked. “I thought... The FATE System records Saint Graphs, doesn’t it? Wasn’t it designed to store their memories, too?”

“It does,” Marie replied, “but it’s not perfect. Even something so incredible has limits to what it can do.”

“Unfortunately,” Da Vinci agreed. “As I’m sure you’ve all grasped already, Emiya’s last memory is of the call Romani made shortly before your encounter with the *Argo*, and everything after that is missing. Of course, the conclusion we have to draw from this is —”

“The FATE System can only back up memories when the time differential between Chaldea and us inside the Singularity is stabilized,” I realized.

Mash gasped loudly.

“What?” Rika demanded.

“Taylor has the right of it,” said Da Vinci. “The fact that it can already do such things as record the details observed via your Master’s Clairvoyance is miraculous by itself, but I’m afraid more in-depth data retention — such as a deployed Servant’s memories — can only be recorded when the flow of time between that Servant and the FATE System itself is normalized. So you see, whenever we at Chaldea contact you via your communicators, your Servants’ memories can be backed up in the FATE System, but anything that occurs after that will be lost if the Servant is...vanquished.”

“Oh my!” said Bradamante.

“So Emiya,” began Ritsuka, “doesn’t remember fighting Herakles?”

Emiya’s head whipped around. “Herakles was there?”

Da Vinci smiled sadly. “I’m afraid there you have your answer, Ritsuka.”

So even if none of our Servants would ever be permanently lost, they could still lose parts of themselves if they died — memories of the battles we fought together, the bonds we’d forged with one another. Sacrificing our Servants would never be entirely without consequences.

Strangely, that made me feel better.

Rika took a step back from Emiya. “So you don’t...”

Emiya sighed and offered her a lopsided smile. “Sorry, Master. But at least the fact that you’re here means that you managed to defeat Herakles without me. Please tell me I at least managed to take a few of his lives in the process?”

Rika’s fists clenched, her hands shaking. “Yeah!” she said with the falsest, most brittle smile I’d ever seen on her face. “You kicked his ass for sure!”