

Chapter CLXIII: Bonds of Friendship

Christmas Day dawned like any other day in Chaldea — cold and desolate, with my alarm clock the only thing that told me it even *was* daytime. I woke up with a sharp intake of breath through my nostrils and was greeted by the unique smell that was *Jackie*: the hint of acidic sulfur masked by the faded scent of the lavender body wash that had never offended me enough to request something more personal.

Looks like she's due for another bath soon. The thought drifted across my mind, barely formed, and I let it linger and fade so that I could lie there and enjoy the warmth of Jackie's body for a few moments longer.

For just a second, I missed Brian. It had been four years since he and I had been anything, done anything, or had the breathing room to do something as sentimental as cuddle, but some part of me wanted him there. Even if I couldn't make any claims of the true love you saw in the movies, he'd been a lot of firsts for me, and that had to mean something.

But he wasn't, and I suspected that any chance of having that again was long gone — had died on Gold Morning, if not the day I turned myself in to the Protectorate. As much as I tried not to think about it, two years had given me enough perspective to realize that he had probably never made it past that battle on the oil rig. The story of his quitting the battle to find some small peace before the end, likely nothing more than a kindness to soothe my worries.

I missed him all the same. Maybe more so *because* that ship had sailed and sunk and vanished into the tides.

In my arms, Jackie shifted, and her hair brushed against my chin as her head turned. "Good morning, Mommy."

"Morning, Jackie," I murmured into her hair, and for another minute or two longer, I stayed there.

Eventually, however, I had to get up and get out of bed, because as tempting as it was to lay there with Jackie and just...*be*, neither my bladder nor my stomach would agree to that, and my responsibilities would not simply disappear because I wanted them to.

So, reluctant as I was, I rolled out of bed, slipping my glasses on as I levered myself to my feet. Once the lights were on, I turned back to my bed to redo the sheets as Jackie climbed out of it herself, and had to stop, because sitting innocuously on my desk was a box, plain and brown and unremarkable, but for the ribbon wrapped around it and the tag that read "Merry Christmas!" in Da Vinci's familiar, slanted script.

I couldn't help the breath that hissed out of my nostrils, something that might have become a sigh one day. "Of course you did."

"Mommy?" Jackie asked curiously.

"Although I don't know how you managed to get it in here without waking either of us up," I told the air dryly.

Knowing Da Vinci, she'd just say that something like that was simple for a genius of her caliber, and that was such a non-answer that it wasn't even worth wasting the breath to ask. The actual answer probably involved familiars, because those might not have enough energy in them to wake either me or Jackie up, although I guess I couldn't rule out Da Vinci inventing some needlessly complicated pseudo-teleportation spell involving Imaginary Number Space or something else that would go straight over my head.

When I went over to my desk, I found a note slipped under the ribbon wrapped around the box, and unfolding the note revealed more of that slanted writing characteristic of Da Vinci's hand. It read:

Dear Taylor,

You'll have to forgive me for playing coy with you yesterday. I have to admit, your spiders were already done, and I could have handed them over at the time without any reservation. I thought it might be more fitting, however, to hold onto them for another day more so that you might have at least one present to unwrap on Christmas. Now more than ever, it is important to keep everyone's spirits up, don't you think? I'm sure Saint Nicholas will forgive me for playing the role of Santa Claus just this once.

Da Vinci, of course, could not see the eyebrow that rose towards my hairline nor the wry smile that tugged on my lips or the little shake of my head, but she probably knew me well enough to guess my reaction anyway. I kept reading:

You'll find enclosed in this package the ten spider puppets I promised you. Although they don't have all of the functions of your ravens and won't be quite as resilient — even with the self-repair function that I naturally included — they shouldn't be altogether that much different from what you're used to. I imagine it won't take you more than an afternoon to figure out how to make use of them. Just take care not to lose them too quickly! They won't be easy to replace!

Regarding your requests, I made two variants. The first has the venom you suggested to me, a potent toxin specialized in breaking down the bonds between Spiritrons. It will not, of course, perform too well against Servants with high levels of Magic Resistance, but if you find yourself against an Assassin, Caster, or Berserker that you can't simply sweet talk into changing sides, it should be of at least some use. The second variant has that tranquilizer, with similar caveats. I'm sure you will be able to work around these limitations.

How might you tell the two of them apart, you ask? An excellent question! I'm certain the answer will be readily apparent once you see them with your own eyes.

The venom, of course, will need refilling, but our dear alchemist friend provided some much needed inspiration, and it will be as simple as feeding them as you would any other spider. The food will be alchemically converted into the appropriate venom. Genius, no?

Merry Christmas, and try not to have too much fun with them!

Leonardo da Vinci

I wouldn't have described my use for the puppets as 'fun,' but that didn't stop my fingers from trembling a little as I set aside the note and carefully undid the knot tying the ribbon together. My stomach did funny little jumps in my gut and my heart thudded anxiously in my chest, and it took a

lot of willpower not to just rip into the package instead of gently disentangling the ribbon and slipping open the lid.

Sitting inside the box was a small cluster of familiar critters, spiders that looked so close to real I could have mistaken them for the real thing, except there was something just a little bit *off* that made it obvious they weren't. I couldn't quite place my finger on what it was, but there was something that stuck in my head, begging me to notice, and if I was being entirely honest with myself, I think I was the only one in the facility aside from Da Vinci who would even have been able to tell.

Each puppet was about the size of an American quarter, motionless, and while one set was a rich, muddy brown with a faint, yellow pattern atop their abdomen, the other was a deep, glossy black with an almost nostalgic red hourglass. Da Vinci's way of ensuring I could tell them apart, if I had to guess, which meant the ones that looked like Black Widows were the ones with the lethal venom and the ones that looked more like a common wolf spider had the tranquilizer.

With the snap of a mental thread, I reached down into the box and gently prodded them one after the other with a small tendril of energy — and as though a switch had been flipped, they suddenly sprang to life, and their bodies came under my control. Every detail of their function filtered through my mind, from the reservoirs that mimicked venom sacs to the miniaturized engines that processed magical energy as fuel and the stomach-like storage space that would convert food into either more venom or silk.

Da Vinci really outdid herself with these. Huginn and Muninn were amazing, but this...

"What is it, Mommy?" Jackie asked curiously.

"A Christmas present from Da Vinci," I answered her simply.

The puppets obeyed my commands as easily and smoothly as any swarm I had ever had, climbing up my fingers and arm the same way any spider would have, and I relished the familiar feel of their legs dancing across my skin. Up my shoulder, across the back of my neck, through my hair, weaving their way into so many places I could hide them. Da Vinci had even gone above and beyond and reinforced their legs so that they could jump as well and as far as any jumping spider could ever dream, which meant that so many avenues opened up for how I could make use of them during a deployment.

Right about then was when I realized I was smiling. I was going to have to do something special to thank her for this, although I had no idea what.

For now, though, there was no reason to carry them around with me and risk someone mistaking them for a normal spider — however silly that might have been, considering we were in Antarctica — so I let them climb back down my other arm and back onto the desk. It might be better to put them back in the box, just as a matter of convenience, or else display them on my desk the way an athlete might his trophies.

The box was probably... Oh?

"The spider puppets weren't enough, huh?" I asked the air. Da Vinci wasn't there to answer me.

From the bottom of the box, I pulled out what I'd originally mistaken for cushioning, and as it cleared the brown cardboard, it unfolded out into a t-shirt, a black thing with gray stripes down the arms and the Chaldea logo on the left sleeve. On the front was a line of text:

I saved the world and all I got was this lousy t-shirt.

A laugh ripped itself out of my mouth before I could stop it. Of all the things she could have put on a t-shirt, *that* was what she went with? I guess it wasn't entirely out of character for Da Vinci, but I would have figured Rika would be the one to go with something like that. Certainly, Romani and Marie wouldn't have picked it out. In fact, I didn't think Marie would have even approved of something like this, just because it was too flippant.

Alec, on the other hand... Or Aisha or Lisa. Any of those three probably would have thought it funny.

God, but we'd never even had a single Christmas together, had we? So much had happened so *fast*.

You know what? It was Christmas. There was nothing important for us to do today and everyone was relaxing, so even if Marie might not have approved, I was going to wear this today. Just this once.

I set the t-shirt aside, then quickly got changed into my workout gear.

"Alright, Jackie, let's go."

"Coming, Mommy!" Jackie replied, and dutifully followed me out of my room.

About an hour later, we returned, me sweaty and grimy, and took a shower together. I made sure to wash her hair really well, and remembering how much my own mother harped on it when I was a kid, got behind her ears. Jackie really seemed to like having her hair washed, or maybe just that I was the one who was doing it, even if she was generally ambivalent to the idea of bathing in general.

Then again, I guess most kids were. I didn't remember fighting it much myself, but in our younger years, Emma had been a bit of a brat about it.

Once we were clean and dried and ready to face the day, I pulled on one of the few pairs of jeans Marie had bought for me — merely so that I didn't have to wear my uniform *every day* — and slipped that t-shirt on over my head.

"Time for breakfast," I told Jackie.

She smiled and nodded. "Mm! We really liked chocolate chip pancakes! Can we have some more?"

I made no promises. "We'll see what Emiya is cooking this morning," I said instead. "It's Christmas Day, so maybe he made something special."

"We can't wait!" Jackie said brightly.

Five or ten minutes later, when the cafeteria door whooshed open and we stepped inside, it was to find the decorations from the previous night still up, from the lights to the strings of popcorn to the

Christmas tree over in the corner. Jackie seemed more fascinated with them than anything else, head swiveling as she looked around at them all again.

“Is this what things are like every Christmas?” she asked me curiously.

“In some places, for some people,” I answered her. “My family was never wealthy, but we got by, and my dad’s coworkers...” The echo of a rowdy bunch of dockworkers sang Christmas carols in my ear. “Well, we’d go down to the union’s headquarters on Christmas Eve and celebrate with them, and have a more private party with just the three of us and my best friend and her family the next day. When Mom died...”

The tradition had died with her. Dad and I hadn’t gone to all that many of the dockworkers’ Christmas parties in the years after that, and then Emma... Well, having the Barneses over on Christmas Day had stopped happening, too. Dad had never asked why, but I guess he just hadn’t been in any place to think too hard about it.

Jackie accepted all of this with a nod, and then hesitated a moment before asking, “Would Mommy’s mommy have liked me, too?”

For a heartbeat, I didn’t have an answer to that, because there was so much context to Jackie and her situation that I wasn’t sure Mom would have been able to wrap her head around it, but once she knew the whole story? Once she understood what Jackie was and why she was the way she was? Once she’d had time to adjust to the idea of Heroic Spirits and Servants and a little orphan girl who must have carved her way through London’s slums and underworld in search of a woman to love her?

“Of course,” I said to Jackie, even though I wasn’t entirely sure it was the truth. “She would have loved you.”

And if not at first, then once she saw how important Jackie was to me, I think Mom would have come around, too. Maybe with caveats, maybe with some reservations, but she would have at least *tried*.

Whether it was completely true or not, Jackie smiled broadly — appropriately, all things considered, like a kid on Christmas morning.

As we walked further into the room, a familiar voice called out a cheery, “Good morning, and merry Christmas!”

At the usual table where we the Masters ate, Arash lifted a mug in greeting and offered a smile. Instead of heading directly for Emiya and food, I redirected over to him, and Jackie followed along dutifully.

“Morning,” I said.

“Morning!” Jackie echoed, waving at him.

He looked meaningfully down at my shirt and arched an eyebrow. “Rika?”

“Da Vinci,” I corrected.

“Really?” He shook his head. “Wouldn’t have thought that fit her style of humor. It’s a nice shirt, though.”

“Comfy, too,” I said. It was a little unfair exactly how many things Da Vinci was just too good at.

He laughed. I nodded to his mug. “Eggnog or coffee?”

“Eggnog,” he said. He took a sip of it. “It’s the Christmas season and this is a Christmas drink, isn’t it? I thought I’d give it a try. And, well, even if Servants can get drunk, my Robust Health means I’m immune, so there’s no danger either way.”

If only our contract had let him share that with me. London would’ve been a lot less of a hassle.

“Sorry I didn’t get you anything,” I told him.

He smiled. “Well, I can’t say I would’ve said no to a silk shirt to wear around the facility, but this whole Christmas thing is new to me anyway, so it’s not like I was expecting anything.”

Ah. Right. Even if he’d been provided knowledge of the holiday and its importance, his story predated Christ, as I understood it, so he had no personal or religious attachment to it. The feasting and the partying probably wasn’t anything new, because celebrations like that had existed for as long as civilization had, but the rest of it must’ve seemed pretty strange to him.

“Do you want me to grab you a tray?”

He shook his head. “I might eat dinner again tonight, but I think yesterday was more than enough for me to enjoy the festivities.” He tipped his mug again. “For now, I’ll make do with my eggnog.”

“Suit yourself.”

So Jackie and I left him and headed up to the counter where Emiya was waiting. He was already preparing a tray — stacked on top of a second one — with two plates. This time, the pancakes had been shaped into thick, fluffy squares, and somehow or another, he had cooked them so that there were plus-shaped grooves, so that when syrup was poured into them, it looked like a wrapped present. More chocolate chips spaced randomly throughout gave the appearance of wrapping paper.

Now he was just showing off.

Like he could read my mind, he smirked at me as he handed the stacked trays over and said, “Enjoy. And merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” I replied dryly.

With our breakfast acquired, Jackie and I made our way back to the table with Arash, and we were just about to sit down when the doors whooshed open again and the twins came in with Mash in tow. Rika spotted us immediately and waved, and then did a double-take when she saw my shirt.

“Holy cow!” she gushed, stunned. “Da Vinci-chan actually did it!”

I paused for a moment and looked down.

— *all I got was this lousy t-shirt.*

Suddenly, it all made a whole lot more sense.

“This was your idea?”

Rika nodded, and a grin grew on her face, so broad it threatened to split her head in half. “I wasn’t sure she’d actually do it, you know! Senpai saved the world and everything, so I said to Da Vinci-chan, you know, it kinda sucks that Senpai didn’t even get rewarded for that before coming here, but wouldn’t it be funny if that was on a t-shirt?”

Her brother slapped a hand to his face, groaning into his palm. “Really, Rika?”

“What?” She turned to him, defensive. “It’s not like we can hand her the key to Tokyo or anything! Even if we *could* leave, we’re just two kids. Who would even believe us?”

“...The UN?” At her raised eyebrow, however, Ritsuka sighed. “No, you’re right. Even if they believed it, there’s no way the UN would want that public. It would cause a mass panic.”

You have no idea, I didn’t say, and I honestly hoped they never would.

“W-well, it’s a nice shirt, even if the, um, text isn’t exactly...” Mash trailed off, unsure of how to finish that.

“It is,” I agreed. “Comfy, too.”

And taking the out as it was offered, Mash turned to Jackie with a smile and said, “Good morning, Jackie!”

“Good morning, Mash,” Jackie replied in kind, and then she went back to her pancakes.

Rika, of course, didn’t miss them. “Oh man, chocolate chip pancakes again? And they’re so fluffy!”

“Honestly, I want to know how he gets them to look the way they do,” said Ritsuka.

You and me both. But Emiya wasn’t likely to share anytime soon, except maybe with Renée.

Oh. Damn. We should’ve gotten something for her, shouldn’t we? I wasn’t sure what we could have possibly come up with, stuck there as we were, but Da Vinci could at least have cooked *something* up, couldn’t she? I’d have to ask later. A late present was still better than no present at all.

“We’ll have to try and come up with a present we can get for Renée,” I said aloud, and a ripple of surprise went across the group, followed shortly by a wave of frustrated shame.

“Ah, geez,” said Rika. “I completely forgot! After everything with Senpai, we didn’t even get her a welcome present or throw her a welcoming party! We didn’t even set out the welcome mat!”

“We don’t *have* a welcome mat,” Ritsuka pointed out.

“It’s a metaphor, Onii-chan! A metaphor!”

“I know.” He heaved a sigh. “And you’re right. We really should have done something to welcome her to Chaldea. After all, she’s stuck here until this is all over, isn’t she? The least we can do is make her feel at home.”

“Miss Renée has already been here a week,” said Mash worriedly. “Do you think it’s too late, Senpai?”

“It’s never too late!” Rika declared stubbornly. “We’ll think of something, and it’ll be so amazing that Renée will cry tears of joy!” Her stomach grumbled. “After we go get our pancakes and eat!”

“No rush,” I told them. “I think it’ll be more meaningful if it’s something well thought out and heartfelt instead of a plan we slapped together in five minutes.”

The three of them nodded. “Right!”

“But breakfast first!” Rika added.

So they went up to Emiya, who was only too happy to serve them up some pancakes of their own. I watched them the entire time — Rika at least seemed to be able to contain herself not to mention coming up with a present for Renée while Renée was cooking less than ten feet away, but this might be a lot easier if we could get some of the Servants in on it.

Unfortunately, by the time we had all finished eating and the breakfast hours started to wane, we hadn’t come up with much in the way of good ideas. The only thing we really knew about Renée was that she enjoyed cooking, or at least took it as part of her responsibilities so dearly that she couldn’t relinquish it even now, and while some premium cookware might be appreciated, it felt a little selfish when it was also something that would benefit us directly and a little redundant when Emiya probably had something just as good or better in his repertoire.

If we were going to get Renée a gift, it should be personal and thoughtful, something that was solely hers in a world where the only thing she really owned was her name. Something that had real meaning and couldn’t just be replicated by a bit of Emiya’s projection magic, something that she could cherish and take with her when this was all over.

So as the morning wore on without any better suggestions, I called an end to the brainstorming session and charged the twins with talking to some of the other Servants for ideas while I handed Jackie over to Arash for a few hours. Mash, I gave the day off from her swimming lesson, on the logic that today was a day for her to relax and enjoy herself. If she wanted to go swimming on her own and get some practice in without Marie and me giving formal instruction, then that was entirely her prerogative.

Marie didn’t have any objections when I let her know.

“No, you’re right,” she said. “As important as it is that Mash learns to swim properly, she’s also…”

Yeah.

Marie cleared her throat. “I-it’s just as important that she has a chance to have fun when she can! After all, it’s the least I can do to make up for everything that my father...”

“You’re not responsible for your father’s sins,” I reminded her. She wasn’t any more convinced this time than she had been before. “But I’ve already told you that, just like I’ve already told you that if you still feel guilty, then the best way to make it up to Mash is to keep doing what you’ve been doing and treat her like a human being with thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs of her own.”

When I brought up the subject of Renée’s welcome present, however, Marie didn’t have any better ideas than the twins and I had. I hadn’t really expected her to, but I at least managed to wrangle permission to throw her a party, just as long as it wasn’t in the cafeteria.

“Use the orientation room,” she suggested. “Since it seems like that’s where we’re doing everything these days and it’s already been used for movie parties, you might as well keep using it for any other celebrations or whatever.” Under her breath, she muttered, “It’s certainly not going to be used for its original purpose anytime soon.”

“Of course, Marie.”

I tried asking a few others, of course, but Siegfried wasn’t much help (“I’m sorry, Master, but I’m afraid I can’t think of anything that would interest her.”) and neither was Hippolyta (“We Amazons had something of a different manner of celebrating our members, and I don’t think Renée Flamel would appreciate them quite the same way.”), but although Aífe didn’t have any suggestions either, she at least pledged the use of her runes, if we needed them.

“I may not have my sister’s raw talent with them, but I should at least be able to help with something so small,” she promised.

Da Vinci, unfortunately, couldn’t really give me an answer either.

“Mm, homunculi aren’t quite the same as humans, but it’s not to say they’re incapable of developing feelings or preferences on certain matters,” she told me thoughtfully. “It might be that she would appreciate some time in the simulator with her father...but on the other hand, the fact that it would only be a simulation of her father instead of the real thing might wind up being upsetting.”

“You don’t have any other ideas?” I asked.

She smiled slyly at me. “It occurs to me that the best way of determining what sort of present a person might like is simply to ask her. If you’re subtle about it, she won’t even know that you’re intending to get her a present, and, well, I’m certain someone like you knows how to be subtle, don’t you, Taylor?”

Was she expecting me to play at humility?

“Yeah, I suppose I do.”

It was, at least, helpful advice, so after lunch — wherein it turned out the twins hadn't had much more luck than me — I waited until Renée left the cafeteria for her afternoon break and approached her in an empty hallway, doing my best to hide my real intentions behind the perfectly reasonable guise of making sure she was adjusting well to the organization.

“It seems like you're settling in well,” I told her conversationally.

She stopped, blinked, and turned to me, halfway through her step. “Oh. Miss Taylor. Forgive me, I didn't realize you were there.”

“Heading back to your room?” I asked.

She shook her head slightly. “No. I...thought I might visit the library. My father gifted me knowledge of alchemy as it was in his time, and I was...curious how it might have changed.”

A book on alchemy? Not... No, probably not. Not when any book I could get her would come straight out of the library to begin with. It might be worth it to ask Da Vinci to copy a couple of them, though, so that Renée could have her own copies. I just thought it felt a little too cheap to make that the present itself.

“Have you had any problems adjusting?”

“No,” said Renée. “Everyone here has been...quite kind to me. The technology of this era has been somewhat confusing, but I am...adapting, I believe would be the term.”

“There's nothing you want, then?” I pressed. “Nothing that would make things more comfortable for you? Nothing you wanted to do or see, if you had the chance?”

She hesitated. “I... Am I...allowed to change my room?”

Please don't tell me Rika has been blaring music late at night.

“Is there something wrong with it? Where it's located?”

She shook her head. “The location does not concern me, only that it seems...sparse. Impersonal. I...no, forgive me, I wouldn't want to insult the Director's kindness.”

“The Director won't be insulted,” I assured her. “She's more concerned with making sure you're fitting in and comfortable than whether or not you like the decor.”

Renée still didn't emote as plainly as a normal person, but the slight downturn of her lips was still visible. “Then...am I allowed to...I believe the word that would fit here is ‘personalize’ my room?”

“However you see fit,” I told her, and then added, “within reason. Major remodeling is something that you would need to get explicit permission from the Director for.”

Renée's brow furrowed a little. “Remodeling?”

“Knocking down walls, moving light fixtures, rerouting the plumbing, that sort of thing.” But it looked like I had a good idea to work with, now I just needed some more details and a little planning. “What were you thinking, in terms of personalizing things? Something like Jekyll’s apartment?”

“Yes.” She looked down at her hands, fingers working over each other. “I...know that it has been corrected and we can’t return there —”

“The apartment itself is still there,” I told her. Her eyebrows rose just the slightest, and her eyes widened just a little, and her lips parted but barely — for her, stunned surprise. “And we can go back to it, if you want, to visit. It... Doctor Jekyll and your father and everything he built won’t be there, but the Singularity and the apartment are both still available for short trips.”

“I see,” she said neutrally. “It...might not be the same, but I think I would like that.”

From her, that might as well have been desperate begging.

“I’ll see what I can do. Was there anything else?”

She hesitated again. “It...might seem silly, but...I would like to see the sun. Would there be a way for me to leave the facility, if only for a few minutes?”

“No.” But there might be a way around that. “I’m sorry, but the facility itself is the only thing keeping us from being incinerated like the rest of mankind. Even the Servants aren’t allowed to risk stepping outside, because no one is sure what would happen if they did.”

“I see.” Renée didn’t look happy to hear this, but she accepted it all the same. “I understand, Miss Taylor. Thank you for telling me.”

“I’ll talk to the Director and see what we can do about making your room more comfortable for you,” I promised her. “For now, though, try and enjoy the rest of Christmas while you can. It’s supposed to be a holiday, after all.”

A faint smile, so small it was barely there, crossed her lips. “I shall try.”

As I left her, a plan started to form in my head, or at least the basic structure of one. It was going to take a lot of work to pull off, definitely permission and help from Marie and Da Vinci, and we were probably going to need to find a way to keep her occupied long enough to get everything finished, but I think it would be worth it in the end.

I didn’t even make it back to my own room before my communicator chimed with a message from Da Vinci.

Masters, it read, please report to the Summoning Chamber. I have one last present for you all.

A quick check on Jackie showed her still with Arash, so I let them go and did an about face to make my way to the Summoning Chamber. I ran into the twins along the way there, and Rika was almost vibrating from excitement. A huge smile threatened to split her face in half.

“It’s time!” she giggled eagerly. “It’s finally time!”

“You don’t know that we’re summoning Nero for sure,” her brother tried to tell her.

But Rika wouldn’t have any of it. “Don’t try to ruin my Christmas, Onii-chan, because I won’t let you!”

“Senpai,” Mash tried this time, “if it isn’t…”

“It will be!” Rika insisted. “For sure! Definitely! Don’t try and use logic, because I’m not listening!”

Mash and Ritsuka both looked at me for help, but I couldn’t give them anything more than a little shrug and a shake of my head. It wasn’t like I had any secret information about this, so I couldn’t have told them one way or the other if Rika was right or wrong. It wasn’t like there was any other Servant we were scheduled to try summoning either, unless we were going to make another attempt at Jeanne since the last one gave us Jeanne Alter.

Da Vinci, Marie, and Romani were already waiting for us when we arrived at the Summoning Chamber, along with the familiar pudgy blond technician, although Romani didn’t look to be in the best shape. He winced at every loud sound and squinted at every light, and there were dark circles under his eyes.

Ah. It seemed he had a little more eggnog than he should have yesterday.

Rika’s attention, however, zeroed in on the platform at the center of the summoning array, where a familiar crooked red and black sword had been set in the place of honor.

“YES!” Rika cheered, throwing her hands up in the air.

“Settle down!” Marie snapped at her.

Rika ignored her. “We’re bringing back Best Buddy! Best! Christmas! Ever!”

“Let’s not get ahead of things, Rika,” Da Vinci said with a smile. “We have to do the actual summoning first.”

“Right!” Rika’s head bobbed up and down. “Right!” She looked around. “Everything’s ready to go, right? We don’t have to do anything special, right?”

Marie gave me a sour look, like I had let an overexcited puppy off of her leash, and all I could give her in return was an arch of my eyebrow. There was no way she hadn’t already known that Rika would be excited about summoning Nero, and she should have expected that it would go something like this.

Da Vinci shook her head. “No, no, nothing special we need to do for this one. Ah — except for the one, last item we need to ensure that it will indeed be Emperor Nero who arrives. Director, if you will?”

“Right.” Marie nodded and stepped forward into the middle of the room, in front of us Masters. When she held out her hand, sitting on her palm was the familiar flickering gem that we knew colloquially as Saint Quartz. “Just like our last summoning, we’ll be using a Quasi-Spiritron Crystal to determine the outcome more reliably.”

Rika reached out to take it, but Marie jerked her hand back before she could. “However!” Marie went on. “We’re still not entirely sure why things didn’t go as planned the last time, so it’s been agreed that we’re going to try and eliminate some of the variables this time. That’s why, instead of having all three Masters performing the summoning ritual and splitting the contract, we’re going to have the contract held solely by the Master with the strongest bond with Emperor Nero.”

She held out the Saint Quartz again.

“You, Rika.”

This time, Rika hesitated before she reached out and took it. “So,” she began nervously, “if something goes wrong, this time —”

“It shouldn’t,” Da Vinci told her, not unkindly. “Last time, we performed the summoning using the bond you Masters had with Jeanne D’Arc to influence the result, and the only reason we could come up with for why it summoned Jeanne Alter instead is because the bond each of you shared with her was too different to reconcile. How that gave us Jeanne Alter is still a little...questionable, but none of our other theories can be confirmed either, so we don’t have any better ones.” She smiled. “This time, the only bond involved will be yours, Rika. And we also have a catalyst and Saint Quartz. The odds of things going wrong are so infinitesimal that they’re essentially nonexistent.”

Rika swallowed and looked down at the Saint Quartz. “If...you say so, Da Vinci-chan, then I guess I just have to trust you.”

Da Vinci chuckled a little. “I wouldn’t worry too much, Rika. Unlike certain other catalysts we loaned out from the Association, that sword has no connection to any other Heroic Spirit. Even without your bond, summoning Emperor Nero would be all but a guarantee.”

Rika opened her mouth to say something, then closed it a second later. “Alrighty.” She nodded. “Let’s do this thing.”

“Mash?” Romani said quietly.

“Yes, Doctor,” Mash said with a nod of her own, and she stepped up to the platform, materialized her shield, and set it down in the center of the array. When she stepped back, Rika stepped forward, set the Saint Quartz down, and then stepped back to the dais and stayed there, fidgeting a little.

“Meuniere?” Da Vinci asked the technician at the console.

“All green,” he replied. “We’re ready to go whenever she is.”

“Very good,” said Da Vinci. “Rika? Whenever you’re ready.”

“Right!” Rika nodded. “Right. Okay. Yeah. Waiting on me.” She took a deep breath, then let it out in a huge, gusty sigh. “Waiting on me.”

“No pressure,” Ritsuka said wryly.

Rika turned halfway around to stick her tongue out at him and blow a raspberry.

“Focus!” Marie barked. “Stop being so childish!”

I have expected Rika to protest and say, “he started it!” but she proved me wrong and instead spun back around. “Right!” she said. “Right, right!”

She sucked in another deep breath, and then threw out one of her hands.

“Heed my words!”

The array flashed and lit up as though waiting. Flickering rainbow lights refracted through the Saint Quartz.

“My will creates your body, and your sword creates my destiny!”

The array lifted up off of the shield and the floor and hung in midair, then slowly began to spin.

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

Faster and faster, the lights spun, and as a wind began to pick up, whipping outwards as it swirled, a grinding noise echoed throughout the chamber like the whirring of a massive set of gears.

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

Faster, and faster, and faster, until the light of the array became a single band of light orbiting the center. The Saint Quartz rattled and wobbled.

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

And as the light of the circle flickered from blue to gold and the ring spun so quickly that it seemed to triple, the Saint Quartz at the center fractured, split, and dissolved. A silhouette sprouted up in its place, a shadow cast in three dimensions like a hologram.

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

The wind blasted outwards as the light of the ring collapsed inwards towards the shadow, and the shadow itself gained form and color — red cloth, golden armor, pale skin, blonde hair, and a twin to the sword sitting in its place of honor. One hand lifted, fingers splayed, and pressed against her chest above the...rather generous bust that looked as though it could spill out of her top at any moment.

“Saber Class Servant, Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, fifth emperor of Rome!” she proclaimed proudly. “I have come now to grace you with my presence! Mm-mm! You should definitely be —”

“Best Buddy!”

And without waiting for Nero to finish her introduction, Rika threw herself off of the dais and enveloped Nero in a hug.