**Chapter CXXXIV: Queen’s Gambit**

We left the bookstore without as much as we’d been hoping to come away with. Not, having said that, that I’d been expecting to have all of the answers handed to us quite so quickly or easily, but it would have been convenient if Andersen had been able to give us more concrete directions or a more specific place to start looking than “further west.”

That much, at least, felt familiar. “Convenient” and I generally weren’t on speaking terms.

“So I’m not the only one who noticed that he didn’t actually tell us how to beat the book thing, right?” Rika asked once the door had closed behind us.

So she’d caught that, too, had she?

“No, you’re not.”

“Maybe he didn’t actually know,” Ritsuka suggested.

“Betcha he didn’t,” Mordred agreed sourly.

“The only way to beat something that doesn’t have a natural form is to give it one, huh,” Emiya drawled. “For an author, that’s a surprisingly insightful conclusion about something the average magus would struggle with.”

“It really isn’t a natural conclusion to come to, is it?” said Mash. She sighed.

“Fou,” the little gremlin commiserated. It pawed at her cheek like it was comforting her.

Yet another moment that made me wonder exactly how intelligent it was.

I checked my communicator for the local time to find we only had about two and a half hours left before the fog started to roll back in. We’d already used up almost half of our allotted time, and the rest of it was only going to continue to tick away.

“We might as well start looking,” I said. “We only have an hour and a half before we need to start thinking about finding a place to stay or making our way back to Jekyll’s.”

Mordred scoffed, but she went along with the rest of us as we started east, towards the further end of Soho, the only lead we had right now on where to find this mysterious Reality Marble book. I still thought Marie would flip out once we got to that part of the report — or, depending on how closely she was monitoring things, might be already — and I could imagine Da Vinci complaining about how that wasn’t how things were supposed to work.

The last two years had been a lot of that for me, and even the last four had featured a lot of stuff that upended everything I thought I knew about the world, but even I could admit that we were running into more of it now than ever before.

Back in the bookstore, Andersen waited until we’d gone halfway up the block before vanishing. I was pretty sure I knew exactly where he had gone.

If he wanted to follow us, then fine. But if he thought he was being sneaky about it, he was in for a rude surprise later on.

“So the only way for this book to gain a physical form we can actually damage is for it to find a Master,” Arash thought aloud. “Do you think he wanted us to help it find one, or has it already found one?”

“He didn’t talk about it like it had,” said Mash. “But he didn’t offer any suggestions for whether we should help it or not.”

“Seems kinda mean, if you ask me,” said Rika. “I dunno if a book can have feelings, but I’d be pretty upset if a bunch of jerks showed up and helped me find a friend just so they could do me in.”

It really depended on its temperament. Andersen had said it wasn’t malicious, but the fact that it was causing as much damage as it was without intending to hurt anyone was a problem of its own. Something that hurt people because it didn’t recognize good from bad was just as dangerous as someone who could and did it anyway, and while that didn’t mean it was deserving of death, it didn’t mean we would necessarily have the option to attempt reforming it.

“We might not have a choice,” I pointed out. “You’re right, we don’t know if this thing can have feelings, but if it’s belligerent, then we’ll have to deal with it like a threat.”

“Maybe Andersen meant for one of *us* to become its Master,” Ritsuka put forth. “Two birds with one stone, right?”

I wondered about that. If that *was* his plan, I wasn’t sure why he hadn’t come out and said it. Then again, he’d been painfully obtuse about revealing the facts of what it was and how it worked to begin with, so maybe he’d intended for us to figure it out ourselves in the first place.

I hated what it might say about other authors summoned as Servants that both of the two we’d encountered so far were some degree of insufferable. Never meet your heroes, right? Even if I’d already had enough experience with that sort of thing that it shouldn’t have been surprising, I couldn’t help being disappointed.

“Maybe,” I allowed. “It depends on how much it’s willing to cooperate. We might not even be able to communicate with it.”

“A talking book really would be a new one, even for me,” Emiya said with a slight smirk.

“Can’t say I’ve ever encountered that sort of thing before either,” Arash agreed.

“You guys wouldn’ta lasted five minutes in Britain,” Mordred commented.

Emiya arched an eyebrow and made a show of looking around. “Technically…”

“Shaddup,” said Mordred, annoyed. “You know exactly what I mean!”

If what she had said earlier was anything to go by, I wasn’t sure she was entirely wrong. It wasn’t like I didn’t have my own experience with “aliens,” but I still hadn’t quite figured out what she meant about the Picts being aliens, too. Literally, metaphorically? Was it an analogy or comparison? They were *like* aliens, but not actually aliens? I wasn’t sure I wanted an answer.

If it turned out the Association had a fleet of flying saucers they were hiding in the basement…I didn’t want to know that either. Maybe because I’d had enough “it’s actually aliens” to last a lifetime, and things hadn’t exactly panned out for the better the last time that one was thrown my way.

“Whatever the case, we have to find it first before we can do anything about it,” I said. “I’ll be keeping an eye out for it, but if it can take spirit form the way a regular Servant can, then I might not be able to find it using my usual methods.”

“Ah,” said Ritsuka grimly. “That makes it a lot harder to find it in a place like this, doesn’t it?”

“It does.”

It would have been so much easier if it was just a regular magic book that had been animated by some spell or another. The fact that it was a Servant — incomplete or not — made things even less clear cut.

Maybe one of these days we’d actually meet a Servant in a situation that fit within the neat lines Marie had originally laid out for me when she was catching me up on how this all worked.

“Usual methods?” Mordred asked.

“Senpai controls bugs,” said Rika. She made a strange gesture with her hands, waggling her fingers, that I thought was supposed to represent a bug skittering across the ground.

Mordred looked morbidly fascinated. “Oh yeah? Izzat how you knew Jekyll was there the other night? You were watching him through some kind of bug?”

“When did I ever say I stopped?” I replied mysteriously.

The morbid fascination tipped over into mild disgust. “So even now, you’re…”

She made a gesture of her own with one hand, one I couldn’t quite make heads or tails of, but I still got the gist of what she was asking.

“Always.”

Lisa would have been proud.

“Damn,” said Mordred, sounding grudgingly impressed. “Dunno how useful that would be in a fight —”

“Trust me,” Rika said with a haunted look, “you don’t *want* to.”

“— but I bet it makes scouting out a place super easy, huh?”

“Not always,” I said. “But in a place with a large enough population of bugs, you could say I see everything.”

“And suddenly, I have never been more glad that Chaldea is in Antarctica,” Rika said.

“I don’t know,” said Ritsuka darkly. “Would Professor Lev have gotten away with the Sabotage if Senpai had been able to see him doing it?”

Whether he meant them to or not, his words cast a pall over the conversation, and any lightheartedness fled. Even the little gremlin riding on Mash’s shoulder seemed to express some sort of grim acknowledgement of what he’d said.

“Fou…”

The only one unaffected was Mordred, who, having no idea what we were talking about, obviously didn’t understand anyone’s reaction to it.

“So does that mean you can see everyone else around here?” she asked. “All the folks in their houses and what-not?”

“Yes,” I answered. “So far, I count one-hundred-thirteen victims of this magical book. All unconscious, no obvious wounds, except the ones they got when they suddenly fell asleep in the middle of their parlor.”

Mordred let out a low whistle.

“The further away from the bookstore we get, however, the fewer I’m finding,” I added. “So either the book is getting more selective —”

“— or it’s found a Master,” Ritsuka concluded.

I nodded. It probably wasn’t the only other explanation, but I didn’t have much better in the way of alternatives. I found it more likely that the first explanation was the better one, that the book was narrowing its criteria, getting pickier about the people it tried to attach itself to, but that was supposing that it had enough conscious thought to attempt something like that. Among the things Andersen had told us, he had never specified whether the book was more like an artificial intelligence — a program running on a code that could narrow its search parameters as it went — or an animal, driven by a base instinct to find a Master.

If it was getting more selective, however, then either it *was* narrowing down its parameters for finding a Master or it was getting weaker the longer it went without one. One of those was better news for us than the other.

The deeper into Soho we went, the more accurate my statement became. What was first nearly every home afflicted by unconscious, comatose inhabitants became every other home, and then every few homes, and then at last there was a single trail for us to follow, a string of apartment buildings scattered along a line where at least one unresponsive victim was laid out.

Eventually, however, even that stopped, and I was left with a cold trail. I let the group go on until we reached it by foot, but even by then, there was no next victim in line, no new person who had been put to sleep and left to dream until they died. We’d hit a dead end.

“Senpai?” Ritsuka said curiously.

“Is something wrong, Miss Taylor?” asked Mash.

“That’s it,” I said simply. “We’re at the end of the trail. There are no more victims past here.”

I lifted one hand and pointed to the last apartment and unerringly towards the elderly man asleep within. Everyone followed the direction of my fingertip and looked at the building, an unassuming thing that looked just like the ones next to it, like they had all been built as a single, contiguous unit that stretched from one street to the next.

Discreetly, Huginn landed on a nearby rooftop.

“No more, as in, no more at all?” Rika asked.

What kind of question was that?

“Yes.”

Mordred squinted, first at the building, and then at me. “You sure about that?”

“I’m sure.”

Within my range, at least. But too much farther, and we would be leaving Soho. If the trail continued at all, it went further out into the western end of London and way farther than we could afford going with the time we had left. We still had to worry about making it back to Jekyll’s apartment before the fog rolled in, after all.

Much as I hated it, we couldn’t afford to keep chasing a lead that led us all over the city. At the very least, *I* had to head back and make sure I didn’t get caught in the toxic fog.

“Well, that’s great,” said Rika. “What do we do now? I didn’t bring any Scooby Snacks, and Fou isn’t exactly a hunting dog, is he? Sorry, Fou. No offense.”

“Fou kyu-fou-fou.”

“Should we go inside and investigate?” suggested Ritsuka. “Unless you’ve already found some clues, Senpai.”

Frustratingly, I hadn’t. Just like all the rest, there weren’t any signs of a struggle or a fight, and the only sign that anything was even wrong was the fact that the old man was sprawled out across a rug instead of his bed, snoring away.

A better mage might have been able to follow the traces of magical energy to track down our mysterious book, but that was never a skill I had mastered as thoroughly as I would have liked.

“I wouldn’t bother him if you don’t have to,” a new voice said, and my heart skipped a beat. “Mister Fredrickson is a really cranky old man, and he hates meeting new people.”

We all whirled about to find a little girl standing on the side of the road just a handful of feet away from our group, maybe eight years old at the oldest. She smiled at us innocently, rocking back and forth on her heels to the sound of her wooden sandals clacking on the stone.

When the hell did she…?

“Merlin’s beard!” Rika breathed, one hand pressed to her heart.

“Sorry,” the little girl said. “Was I not supposed to say anything?”

“No, you just surprised us,” said Ritsuka, although his eyebrows hadn’t quite managed to settle back down yet.

*That* was putting it mildly. Had I just not noticed her because I didn’t have as dense a swarm on the streets as I normally would have? But where could she have come from that she made it all this way without me picking up on her?

The little girl raised the wide sleeve of her robe — her kimono, if I was remembering the term right — up to her mouth to stifle a giggle.

“Sorry about that,” she apologized. “I didn’t mean to scare anyone. It’s just that you all looked lost.”

“We’re not lost,” grunted Mordred. “We just…hadn’t figured out where to go next.”

The girl tilted her head with a little smile. “Isn’t that what being lost means?”

Surreptitiously, I spread my swarm out a little more, searching for where she might have come from, but everyone was accounted for. All of the people I’d found earlier were exactly where they had been ten minutes ago. It was as though she had simply appeared from thin air.

My brow furrowed. Jack the Ripper? Did he *have* some sort of shapeshifting skill on account of how he could be “anyone,” or was there another Assassin walking around who was masquerading as a little girl? With Presence Concealment hiding her presence, it would make perfect sense as an explanation for why she could stand right in front of us and no one could feel that she was a Servant.

Or maybe I was being paranoid. But on the off chance I wasn’t…

*Arash,* I said cautiously, *keep an eye on her.*

His head twitched minutely, like he barely stopped himself from looking in my direction. *You don’t think…*

*I don’t know*, I admitted. *But I don’t know how else she snuck up on us.*

Because the only thing I could think of was a Servant using spirit form.

His lips tightened briefly, and a moment later, he was all smiles. “We know where we are, Miss, but we’re just not quite sure where we’re supposed to go now. We’re looking for something and we’re having trouble finding it.”

The girl titled her head again. “Looking for something? It’s dangerous out here in the fog, you know.”

Mordred scoffed. “Nothing we can’t handle.” She glanced in my direction. “Most of us, anyway.”

I ignored the dig entirely. “We’re trying to find a very special book.”

“Wouldn’t you look for a book in a bookstore?” the girl asked. “Or maybe on a bookshelf? Or even in a library?”

If it wasn’t for the completely guileless expression on her face, I might have thought she was mocking me. Maybe she still was, but in that case, she was one hell of an actor.

“It’s a magical book!” said Rika. She made gestures with her hands and arms, like she was pantomiming a large box. “About *yea* big or so! I dunno if it has legs or not —”

“Andersen didn’t say, did he?” Ritsuka thought aloud. “Does that mean it flies somehow?”

“— but it’s been running around causing trouble, and we’re here to stop it!”

“A giant book that can run around?” said the girl. “I’ve never seen anything like that before. Are you sure that’s real?”

The twins shared a look. “Apparently, it’s been going around and putting people to sleep,” said Ritsuka. “That’s why we have to find it. If all of those people sleep for too long, then they’ll never wake up.”

“That sounds terrible,” said the girl, although she didn’t sound all that upset. If she really *was* a regular little girl, then maybe she didn’t believe us. “I don’t think I can help you, but Papa might know something.”

Papa?

“Papa?” the twins parroted, unknowingly echoing my own thoughts.

“Oh,” said Mash, “are you here with your father?”

The girl nodded happily. “Papa says he’s here on business, so he can’t always play with me, but Papa is really smart and knows lots of stuff. He might be able to help you find this magical book you’re looking for!”

*Trap*, my instincts all but roared at me. But just as loudly, they also shouted, *opportunity*. If this girl was anything other than what she looked like, then whoever or whatever her “Papa” was, he was very likely P, B, or M. She would lead us into a trap, but a trap that also put us within striking distance of one of this Singularity’s masterminds.

Without any other leads, this was too good a chance to pass up. The magical book could wait — or maybe it wouldn’t, because it had been captured by her “Papa,” and that would be an incredible stroke of luck. Two birds with one stone.

“Where *is* your papa?” I asked.

I doubted we’d be that lucky, but in lieu of better options right now, I was going to jump on this one. The only real alternative seemed to be wandering aimlessly until we found something.

She lifted a hand and pointed. “Over there.” In the exact opposite direction she’d come from. More and more, it seemed she was probably a Servant of some kind. “He’s busy right now, so I came out on my own because I was bored.”

I made a show of glancing in the direction she pointed the way everyone else did. If I was remembering right, the only thing down in that direction was Buckingham Palace and the surrounding greenery.

So unless her so-called father had picked out an apartment along the way, he’d set himself up in the palace. Out of ego? Or maybe because it was easily defensible and sturdier than a good portion of the other options.

It also didn’t follow the magical tome’s trail, but considering we didn’t have more of a trail to follow, that might not wind up mattering.

“Do you think he’ll have time to talk to us?” asked Ritsuka.

“Oh, loads of time,” said the girl. “He can’t do his business out in the fog, can he? That would just be silly.”

“I guess you *do* need a clear head to get anything done,” Rika said sensibly, and I bit back a grimace at the pun.

“Then we might as well see what he can tell us.”

“What?” Mordred demanded.

“Got any better ideas?” Emiya asked pointedly. “It’s our only other lead for now, isn’t it?”

“Tch.” Mordred scoffed. “This guy had better have something good to say, or I’m kicking your ass.”

*Noted,* I didn’t say. There was no point in dignifying that with a response. “Alright,” I said instead, speaking to the girl, “let’s go see your papa.”

The girl smiled at me. “Okay!”

And then she very nearly skipped away, heading off in the direction she’d pointed. We followed after her, and as we walked, Ritsuka edged closer to me.

“You sure about this one, Senpai?” he asked lowly. “The Restoration would’ve been over ten years ago at this point, so it’s not impossible she and her father really did come here, but…”

It took me an extra second to remember he was talking about the event that had been mentioned back in Fuyuki, the one that ended Japan’s isolationism, and I was a bit embarrassed to admit that whether or not it was possible in terms of the proper timeline hadn’t even been on my radar of things that made a kimono-wearing Japanese girl in London suspicious. Now that he brought it up, however, I had to agree: even if it wasn’t impossible so soon after Japan opened up trade with the West, it might have been more unlikely than not.

“It’s entirely possible that she is what she says she is,” was my answer, but the way I said it conveyed my own skepticism, and that seemed to be enough for Ritsuka. He nodded, frowning, and drifted back closer to his sister and Mash.

The girl led us on southward through Soho, navigating the streets so deftly that she could have been mistaken for a native, or at least taking the twists and turns so confidently that someone who had never been there couldn’t tell the difference. Where she was leading us *to*, I still wasn’t quite sure, and I became less sure the further we went.

A quick check of my map while she wasn’t looking confirmed my suspicion — if she was leading us to Buckingham Palace, then she was taking a very roundabout route. Did she want us to approach from the front, to make it look the most impressive? While that wasn’t impossible, it didn’t quite feel right either.

Had her “Papa” actually picked out an apartment instead of squatting in the palace? That was…less predictable, but there was a kind of safety, a security in not doing what everyone would expect you to, and that meant he might be cleverer than I originally gave him credit for.

Eventually, we left Soho and stepped into St James’s, the district that sat northward and slightly to the east of Buckingham. The girl took a sharp turn and led us down another straight road for a while, and then, without any warning whatsoever, made another sharp turn down another road. When we came up behind her and rounded the corner, suddenly, there in the distance, there were trees and greenery. An island of vegetation amidst the brick and stone.

“Not much farther now!” the girl sing-songed over her shoulder. “Papa is right up ahead!”

“About goddamn time,” Mordred grumbled.

I stretched out into my swarm, searching around the place for a man waiting in ambush for us to pass by, but there didn’t seem to be anyone like that, even though every instinct was screaming that there should be. There were no more victims around either, and there hadn’t been any new ones on the way down. The people in this area of the city were all healthy, awake, and going about their days, as much as they could without leaving the house.

Some of them, as much as they could without leaving their beds, but I tried not to pay too close attention to the marital bed. Who was doing the horizontal tango with who wasn’t at all relevant to our investigation.

There were less productive ways of dealing with boredom, I guess.

*Anything?* asked Arash.

*No,* I replied. *You?*

*Not seeing anything out of place on the rooftops,* he said. *Whatever’s going on here, they’re doing an excellent job of being subtle.*

Just what we needed. The smart ones were always the biggest pain in the ass to deal with.

“So what’s your papa like anyway?” Rika asked.

“Hmm,” the little girl hummed. “That’s a toughie. Papa is really fun when he’s really fun, but he’s also really scary when he’s really scary. But he’s a really good person, deep, deep down inside!”

“He doesn’t hit you, does he?” asked Mash, worried.

The little girl laughed. “Don’t be silly! Papa’s fists are for self-defense!”

Rika struggled for a moment, but crumbled after only a few seconds. “So would you say that they’re for —”

“Rika, no,” her brother tried. In vain.

“— Kung Fu fighting?”

Ritsuka sighed, and I very much wanted to as well. The little girl, on the other hand, just looked back at Rika, utterly clueless.

“Of course they are,” she said. “Papa is an expert at that sort of thing.”

Ritsuka blinked and looked back at her. “He is?”

“Yup!”

I filed that little tidbit away. It might have been gotten in a bit of a backwards way, but that was actually fairly useful information. So if this mysterious “Papa” really was one of the culprits behind this whole Singularity, P, B, or M, then that meant he was someone who had some martial arts training. Perhaps an author who had gone to war at some point before writing his works down, maybe one whose writing had been inspired by his experiences on the battlefield.

If I could ask without tipping the girl off, I would have had Da Vinci on the line right then and there to have her cross reference famous authors who also happened to have military service in their backgrounds. Right then, however, it would probably spook the girl, and if she really was a Servant, then tracking her would become just shy of impossible the instant she took spirit form.

If she was an Assassin? All the more so.

Still, no suspect materialized as we walked, either literally or figuratively. If her papa was hiding somewhere, or even if he was going about a normal life in her absence, then I couldn’t find him at all. There wasn’t anyone suspicious in my range.

In a way, that itself was suspicious. It was entirely possible that “Papa” didn’t actually exist and she’d just invented him as a means of luring us out here and towards her trap. It was also entirely possible that this really was our mysterious Jack the Ripper using a shapeshifting skill to hide in plain sight, although the choice of a young Japanese girl in a bright pink kimono made that one feel less likely.

We didn’t make any more turns, and instead, the girl led us straight towards that stretch of greenery, that small oasis of vegetation, too small to properly be called a park, but large enough and secluded enough for a person to hide in quite easily. A wrought iron fence that looked like it came straight out of a regency novel stretched around the whole thing.

“Just up ahead!” the girl assured us.

She continued up to a pathway that led into the foliage, an entrance through the fence marked by twisting metal arches, paused long enough to look back at us with a smile, and then went inside.

My lips pursed, and I stopped a few feet from where she’d gone in at, staring at the trees and the grass that lay beyond. She couldn’t have made it more obvious how much of a trap this was if she’d tried.

“Senpai?” asked Ritsuka. There was something guarded in his expression, something worried and alert, despite how willing he seemed to go along with everything.

So I wasn’t the only one who knew we were walking into a trap.

“Is something wrong, Miss Taylor?” asked Mash.

A quick check showed we still had a little over two hours before the fog was supposed to roll back in. It should be plenty of time to spring this and make it back, but we’d have to be careful to make sure we had enough time to make the trek to Jekyll’s safely.

“No,” I said eventually. “It’s nothing.”

There was something I was missing. I knew that even as we followed the girl into that tiny little forest. But what it was, I couldn’t put my finger on it. Maybe it was the absence of a bounded field, or at least one I could detect, because if there was a place for her and her papa to set up an ambush, this was it.

And yet, there wasn’t one. There wasn’t even any sign of one.

Up above, Huginn circled, looking down. But even with a literal bird’s eye view, I couldn’t find anything that looked off or wrong, with the sole exception of the fact that —

Wait. There *was* someone else out here. A man, it looked like, coming from the opposite direction of us and entering this little park from that end. Was her papa real after all?

“Is this where we’re meeting your papa?” I asked the girl.

“Of course!” the girl said. “The best place to have a tea party is out in the park, isn’t it? I wanted to have it in a bigger park, but Papa says that bigger place near the castle is too conspicuous.”

“He does, does he?”

So if he really existed, her papa was definitely one of the smart ones.

“Obviously, he doesn’t know how to have a proper tea party,” Rika joked with complete seriousness.

“Right?” the little girl agreed. “But it’s okay, because the important part of any tea party is the guests. And all of you make such wonderful guests indeed!”

I cast around, looking for any clues, but just like it had been before, nothing seemed unusual. The little park was the same stretch of greenery, shrouded by tall trees with expansive canopies, the same path we were walking through them, and in front of us, at what had to be the very center of the park, a large, lopsided table with chairs set out for everyone. A spread of various snacks and finger foods was arrayed across the surface of its white cloth.

*That* part was the only part that seemed strange. A table out in the middle of the park? Hers, presumably? Was this a trap meant specifically for us, or had she intended to get whoever she could reel in?

“You can meet my friend, too!” the girl said. “I invited her to join us, so she should be here soon!”

Arash glanced at me. *Do we think her friend…?*

*I don’t know*, was the only answer I could give. Could we count on something that convenient? When we couldn’t even be sure that this girl wasn’t a Servant herself?

None of this smelled right, and I could point out all of the things about this that were raising red flags, but what the truth was behind it all, that part remained frustratingly elusive. That she was still going through with this when we had four Servants on our side had to be one of the most confusing parts.

Assassins were supposed to be the weakest class, at least in terms of fighting other Servants, and we had two Archers and a Saber, all of whom excelled in close range combat. You had to have a really good trick up your sleeve to expect to come out of a fight against them the winner by yourself.

“I can’t wait!” said Rika.

The girl led us to the table and the chairs around it, and she daintily took a seat at one of them, seemingly at random, imploring us to join her. The twins shared a look, then looked at me, and when none of us had a good reason not to play along, we all took a chair of our own and sat down with her.

The high-backed plush armchair I chose wound up surprisingly comfortable and not at all rickety, despite its appearance.

“Papa will be here soon,” said the girl. “While we wait, why don’t we all have some tea and snacks?”

Without waiting on us, she took the nearest teapot — of which there were several, spouting puffs of steam — and poured herself some tea into a teacup that looked like it had come from an entirely different set of fine china from the teapot. In fact, looking around, I wasn’t sure there was a single matching set anywhere on the table.

She also grabbed a slice of some kind of thin, spongy cake, sprinkled with powdered sugar, and started eating it with a fork. As though we really were just sitting down in a garden having a tea party in Victorian England.

In a sense, I guess we were.

The twins seemed less eager to join in, a little nervous, but after a second, they picked their own cups and poured their own tea, because unlike me, they apparently didn’t have to worry about being poisoned, thanks to their contract with Mash. I poured a cup for myself just to be polite, but didn’t drink any of it, because I didn’t have that convenience.

“Really?” Mordred complained. She was the only one still standing. “We’re gonna do this *now*?”

“It’s the best lead we’ve got, isn’t it?” said Arash.

“A pretty sorry state of affairs on its own,” Emiya added, looking down at his own teacup. “But the only other place for us to go is back to Jekyll’s to see if he has any new information for us.”

We were probably going to have to go and check out what had happened to the Mage’s Association, too, at least at some point, but I was happy enough to put that off for now. The less cause we gave them to stick their noses into things, the better.

“Tch.”

She didn’t look happy about it, but Mordred eventually did sit down, grudgingly, and moodily poor herself a cup of tea. And then she let it sit there and didn’t touch it, like she had just done it in the first place to observe propriety and proper manners.

“Oh,” said Mash suddenly, looking down at her teacup in surprise. “This is actually really good.”

“It is,” said Rika. “It tastes just like my favorite brand of milk tea, but — hey, I never put any milk in it!”

“Mine’s oolong,” Ritsuka said. His brow furrowed. Troubled. “Exactly the way I usually make it, too.”

“Of course it is,” the little girl said. “Why wouldn’t it be, when you’re the one who poured it?”

That… Was that supposed to make some kind of sense?

*Arash?* I asked, since I wasn’t stupid enough to risk trying my own. His Robust Health skill should be enough protection for him.

“Chai,” he said thoughtfully, “with fruity undertones and a hint of honey. But tea wasn’t around back when I was alive, at least not where I was, so I’m not that familiar with it as a drink.”

“I should hope you like it, at least,” said the girl. “If not, why did you pour it at all?”

“Why, indeed,” Arash said with a lopsided smile.

If she really had poisoned the tea and was disappointed that it wasn’t working, the girl gave no sign. The smile on her face was so firmly affixed that it was actually kind of creepy because of who it reminded me of.

I was suddenly glad that I hadn’t dared to try the tea myself.

“Sorry we’re late!” a new voice announced, and my spine went ramrod straight as another person I hadn’t seen coming appeared from out of the foliage, trotting up towards the table. “We had some important business to take care of!”

“You’re just in time!” the girl said brightly. “Come, come, say hello to everyone else! We’re all just waiting on Papa, now!”

The new person was a small girl, around the same age as the kimono girl, robed in a raggedy black cloak with tattered ends. A shock of white hair fell haphazardly around her face and cheeks, framing green eyes sharp as knives and doing a very bad job of hiding several thin, ugly scars that stretched across her face.

There was, ironically, something about her appearance that immediately put me on edge. Not a presence or an air about her so much as an instinctive sense of something writhing just under the surface of that childish face.

“We hope you’re not mad,” the new girl said contritely. “We were supposed to be here sooner, weren’t we?”

“Oh, we’re all mad, here,” our host said pleasantly. “This whole world is mad, you see, and so are we. Quite mad. But we’re not angry, no, so come on, take a seat, Jackie. There’s more than enough room.”

She smiled, cherubic, and poured some more tea in a cup at the seat next to hers.

“Welcome to Alice’s tea party!”