

## Chapter XII: Wrought Iron Chef

“I’ve got my eye on you!” Rika promised for the thousandth time.

Across from her, Archer — Emiya, as we’d found out his name was, and finding a Heroic Spirit whose legend *wasn’t* in our databanks had surprised everyone, Romani most of all — let out an exasperated sigh.

“I’ve already told you, Master,” he said tiredly. “Whatever that version of me may have done to you or against you, I have no memory of it.”

I wondered if that was really true or just a lie he was telling to avoid embarrassment. In theory, Heroic Spirits were outside of time and space, beings who existed independent of past, future, or present, and so every memory they would ever or had ever had would be recorded at the moment they ascended. That was how it had been explained to me. In practice, how that worked with summonings whose events they should already know, I couldn’t figure out.

But if some alternate version of *me* had done something I couldn’t condone, like joining the Slaughterhouse Nine or whatever, I definitely would’ve tried to pretend I didn’t know she existed.

“You say that,” Rika said, and it was good to see at least a little bit of her old energy back, “but you aren’t fooling me, Mister! I can see right through your dastardly plans!”

Emiya just sighed again. “Seconds?”

Rika shoved out her tray and plate. “Yes, please!”

Without comment, he piled up more food onto her plate until he’d matched her original portions, and she giggled like a bride on the morning of her wedding day as she watched. There was even a line of drool that dribbled down from one corner of her mouth, and she sucked it back in as she licked her lips. Probably the only reason she wasn’t bouncing on her heels excitedly was because it would dislodge her meal. She wanted to be eating it, not wearing it.

Emiya finished with a flourish by pouring another glass of orange juice for her. “Enjoy it, Master,” he said wryly. “After all, I made more than enough for you to eat it to your heart’s content.”

“This still doesn’t mean I forgive you!” she shouted back over her shoulder as she walked as quickly as she could back to her seat. Behind her, Emiya just shook his head, an exasperated smile on his lips, and busied himself with tending the kitchen.

An extraordinary stroke of luck, it seemed, that the first Servant we’d successfully summoned turned out to be a deft hand at the stove. I still had no idea what to expect of him as a combatant — the battle simulator was still undergoing repairs, so while I could practice my Gandr, Servants were forbidden using it — but even if he was barely middling, his skill with cooking was already an incredible boon.

He wasn't what I'd been expecting, but then I hadn't really been expecting much of anything, during that test. I think I'd actually half-expected the summoning to fail, just because that was the sort of thing I was used to having happen.

Rika slid back into her chair, and immediately, she grabbed her utensils and started shoveling her food back into her mouth. You might have thought, watching her wolf it down so quickly and with such abandon, that she hadn't eaten in a week.

"So good!" Rika moaned, like she was having an altogether different experience. Ritsuka smiled fondly and shook his head.

I watched her from a little further down the table, sipping at a mug of surprisingly good coffee while I tried to think of something to say, but nothing was coming to mind.

I was supposed to increase unit cohesion, Romani had said. Well, the way he'd put it had been more like, 'open up to them so that they can trust you,' but it amounted to the same thing that my instructors had tried so hard to instill in me back when I was in the Wards. The goal of any squad leader was to have the respect of her squadmates while also being friendly and approachable enough to keep the squad from ripping itself apart.

You didn't have to be everyone's big sister, but they should at least trust you.

Admittedly, I hadn't really followed through on that. It had been more like I was racing towards a goal, and the Wards had been caught up in my wake, carried along by sheer momentum. Becoming a close knit unit, making friends, being that gentle authority all of the classes said I was supposed to be? That was something I'd never managed to figure out, and at the time, hadn't really cared to.

What would Lisa have said, at that moment? To me or one of the Undersiders, not someone she was trying to tear down?

"You know, if you keep eating like that, the first thing that's going to balloon is our food budget, followed shortly by your waistline."

"Miss Taylor!" Mash gasped.

A snort tore out of Rika's nose, and she doubled over her plate, slapping a hand across her mouth to keep from spitting out her food. Visibly, audibly, and very noticeably, she swallowed what was eating, and then rasped, "W-worth it..."

"Are you okay, Rika?" her brother asked.

"T-this is the food of the gods," Rika proclaimed hoarsely. "I won't let a single bite go to waste!"

To punctuate this, she speared another bite of her pancakes and shoved them into her mouth, chewing with large, exaggerated gnashing of her jaw. It was actually kind of gross.

"Senpai has a bit of a point though, Rika," Ritsuka said. "I know Emiya's food is really good, but you're eating way more than you usually do."

“Don’t ruin this for me, Onii-chan,” Rika said. “This might very well be my last meal. I’m going to enjoy every bit of it I can.”

And just like that, any hope of further conversation died a swift and brutal death. I sighed into my coffee as Mash’s brow furrowed with worry and Ritsuka looked down into his own mug.

There was nothing I could have said to encourage her that wouldn’t have been a lie. If I was a more inspiring hero, maybe I could have told her something like, “I promise you that I’ll make sure we all come back,” or, “No matter what, we’re all making it out of this alive,” but I wasn’t good with happy little lies like that. The reality was that one or all of us could be dead by dinnertime, if things went wrong or if we screwed up at any point. There were no guarantees.

How quickly our second week of downtime had passed us by.

Today was the day we began our mission into the Orleans Singularity, with the goal of correcting the deviant history and bringing it in line with the proper course of events.

Unfortunately, we still didn’t have a good idea of what all that entailed. Romani and Da Vinci hadn’t been able to get any higher resolution scans of the situation on the ground, so there was no way of knowing just what had caused the deviation, what that deviation even was, who or what we could expect in terms of opposition, or even whether there were still living people there.

Would it just be another burning wasteland, occupied only by Servants? I wasn’t sure which I preferred: a desolate landscape bereft of people, or a thriving countryside filled with bystanders who could get caught in the crossfire. I guess the former. There was something kind of liberating in not having to worry about anything except bringing the enemy down, and that was something you didn’t have when you had to think about collateral damage to a human population.

My mood soured, I stood from my seat and drained the last of my coffee, then went to return my tray and plate. Behind me, I heard Ritsuka mumble to his sister, “Good going, Rika.”

Emiya arched one white eyebrow at me as I approached him, but whatever serious effect he might have been going for was ruined by the bright pink apron he was wearing, with “#1 Chef” printed on the front in bold. It had, quite obviously, been owned by someone a lot smaller with a lot brighter a personality who was also quite female.

“Here for seconds?” he asked in that rumbling baritone that had no business being quite as sexy as it was. “Or are you going to threaten me against even thinking of betraying you?”

Did he expect me to blame him? Cuchulainn had explained the concept clearly enough, I felt. The Servants of the Fuyuki Grail War had been changed, corrupted. Even Saber, the noble King Arthur, apparently hadn’t been immune to the effects, such was her oppressive, malevolent presence, back in the cavern. Whatever had attacked us in that ravine might look close enough on the outside, but there was no telling exactly how messed up he’d been on the inside.

“Do I have reason to?” I asked him mildly.

He blinked, brow furrowing, because that apparently wasn’t what he’d been expecting.

The best comparison I could think to make was to a Master power, *the* Master power, the most insidious and dangerous of them all. Heartbreaker wasn't a bad line to draw, but what my mind leapt to was the Simurgh, how she could twist you up inside without you ever realizing you'd been twisted, how she could turn your greatest pleasure into your worst agony, your best friend into your most virulent enemy, and even an ordinary man into homicidal radical.

The Hopekiller... It was an appropriate moniker.

"I've seen you at your worst," I told him as I set my tray down. He took it to be washed almost on autopilot, his hands moving as his eyes stayed locked with mine. "I've seen the oppressive tyrant King Arthur could have become. I've also seen things that make both of those pale in comparison. Walked through hell."

I felt my lips tug to one side as his eyes narrowed on me. The port where my real arm met my prosthetic was so seamless that you couldn't tell where the real deal ended and the replacement began, but the stump still ached with a phantom pain. I could even feel the twin divots in my forehead, scars that had long since healed as to be almost unnoticeable.

"Didn't come out the other side entirely intact."

He grinned. It wasn't a nice smile. "Sounds like quite a story."

One that I didn't plan on telling him anytime soon. Or ever. There was a difference between trusting him not to kill me and trusting him with my deepest, darkest secrets.

"Point is," I said, dragging the topic back, "I don't find you very threatening. And, frankly, if you wanted all of us dead? We'd already be dead."

"Ha!" the bark of laughter burst out of him, and it seemed to catch even Emiya by surprise. "Well, now. You sure are an interesting person, aren't you? It's almost a shame you aren't the one holding onto my Command Spells. A woman like you sounds like the kind of Master I'd get along with just fine."

That was what I was worried about. It was true that I didn't blame him for what his counterpart had done in Fuyuki, but if that counterpart was just all of Emiya's priorities inverted and a few of his inhibitions loosened, then what little I knew of his tactics and thinking really were the worst sort of matchup for me, because they were the best sort of matchup for me.

Emiya and Khepri probably would have gotten on like a house on fire.

I gave him an empty smile. "Sorry. I have a prior commitment with an Irish guard dog."

And then I turned and left him on that note, blinking and gaping incredulously at my back. I didn't bother returning to the twins and Mash — I still didn't quite know how to address their fears and concerns in a way that wasn't just "buckle up and move on," and my last attempt at humor had died in a fire.

I felt like a broken record repeating this over and over again in so many ways, but they needed something different than a force of personality, and force of personality was the only way I'd ever

really known *how* to lead. From the Undersiders to the Wards and all the way up to becoming Khepri, that was all I'd ever needed, all I'd ever used, and for Earth Bet, it had worked just fine.

This wasn't Earth Bet. Ritsuka and Rika weren't my Undersiders, weren't my Wards, and weren't hardened by a world constantly on the brink, and I couldn't treat them like they were.

Strangely, I missed Glenn Chambers, just then.

I took in a deep breath and I held it, waiting until the cafeteria doors slid shut behind me before I let it out in the empty corridor. The sigh that hissed out of my mouth was positively gust-like in its intensity.

How the fuck was I supposed to do this? We, quite literally, came from two different worlds. I'd spent two years fighting, bouncing from one conflict to the next, preparing for the end of the world, and then I'd spent another two years preparing for the *next* world-ending catastrophe, which may or may not have pulled a stunt that made Scion's tantrum seem tame by comparison, because I still wasn't clear on whether "all of mankind" meant "*all* of mankind," or just this particular world's.

Before all of that, I'd had to live with the knowledge that any day, a sea monster from Hell, a walking nuclear holocaust, or HP Lovecraft's twisted vision of an angel could decide, gee, didn't the place I was living in look like it needed a good remodeling?

Rika and Ritsuka... by all appearances, had led relatively normal lives in a relatively normal world, or at least one where they never had any reason to suspect it *wasn't*. A life without gangs whose power was enforced by a man who transformed into a dragon or a pair of women who could make themselves thirty feet tall. A life without capes or Endbringers or doomsday scenarios.

Until now, that was.

How the fuck was I supposed to lead them through a gauntlet of seven Singularities with enemies who could do things they only recently discovered weren't limited to comic books?

"Poorly, apparently," I muttered to the air.

Mouth twisting, I stormed off, mood fouled, and I tried to keep the frothing sea of my restless frustration from boiling over. The simulator was back up, if not completely repaired; maybe it was time to see if I could finally put my puppets into action.

It wasn't the first time over the last two weeks that I'd had the thought that I might be better off doing this solo. I didn't think I would have said no to having Mash on board, not with that shield of hers being so sturdy and useful, but having it just be the two of us taking on whatever Flauros and his king could throw at us? It would have been so much *easier*.

But however pragmatic it was, I would've been an idiot to think it would happen. Not now, not after Fuyuki. Da Vinci and Romani might have sided with me, but Mash would pick the twins and dig in her heels, without a doubt. And a contract, especially between Master and Servant, needed the consent of both parties for it to work properly.

And that meant I *couldn't* just leave them here to be babysat by the staff while I went and saved the world. Again. They *had* to go with me, and that meant that I *had* to lead them.

If only I just fucking knew *how*.

“Oh, Taylor, there you are.”

Halfway back to my room, however, I was met by one of the last people I wanted to see, just then. In my head, I imagined a release valve, and I let my anger and frustration drain out of it as I forced myself to calm down.

“Da Vinci,” I greeted her as politely as I could manage, just then. “Was there something you needed?”

“In a way, it’s really more like something *you* needed,” she replied, grinning, and then she reached into some pocket or compartment that I didn’t quite see and pulled out a familiar knife resting in a sheath. “Here.”

My brow furrowed as I took it gingerly. “This is…”

The nanothorn dagger Defiant had given me. My lips pulled to one side in a sort of half-grin.

“Even you couldn’t figure it out in the end, huh?”

But Da Vinci kept grinning.

“Oh, it certainly took me a lot longer than I was expecting it to,” she said smugly. “The black box that fudges some of the internal mechanisms really was quite the frustrating conundrum, so I had to work backwards from the basic principles to figure out how to do it properly, but it was only a matter of time until I had it solved.”

I blinked. Stopped. Had to go back over that in my head to make sure I heard it correctly.

“You *figured out* Tinkertech?”

“Well, perhaps only this specific piece of it,” she admitted. “Oh! And that delightful flight pack of yours, too! Ah, I’m sorry to say, it’s… Erm, it’s in a few too many pieces to put back together properly.”

Da Vinci offered me an apologetic smile.

Ah. So I wasn’t getting *that* back, was I?

“You can’t fix it?”

“Strictly speaking, it arrived broken,” she said. “I managed to piece together the mechanism it uses for flight, but without knowing the original configuration when it was in working order, it’s a bit harder to put it back together again. Oh! That reminds me. I upgraded that delightful little knife of yours.”

She gestured to my nanothorn dagger.

“I fixed the maintenance issues, so it should restore itself to its default state while it’s sheathed. No more tedious cleaning process!”

I blinked at her again. “You what?”

“I got the idea from a couple of myths and legends,” Da Vinci explained, “spruced up a bit, of course, with more enlightened, modern sensibilities. The sheath keeps a ‘blueprint’ of how the dagger is supposed to look and function, and whenever that knife is sheathed, it’s restored from that blueprint. Naturally, there are some limitations, but no more muss and fuss, no more maintenance!”

“That’s...”

Incredible.

I looked down at my nanothorn dagger. Defiant would have given his left arm for this.

My cheek twitched.

If he still had the original, that was, and hadn’t replaced it with cybernetics.

And if he hadn’t been wiped out with the rest of humanity. I clutched the dagger tighter, because it might very well be the only thing left of him and Dragon, now.

“Thank you for this, Da Vinci.”

She waved it off. “I’m just returning what belonged to you, now that I no longer need it.”

“Still. This means a lot.”

She gave me one of her rare, gentle smiles, the genuine kind that really brought out the image of the painting this body of hers was based on, like she understood exactly what I was thinking.

“I’m afraid that’s all of the good news I can give you,” she said. “It wasn’t just returning that knife of yours that brought me to you; I was heading towards the cafeteria myself, because I need to retrieve Rika, Ritsuka, and Mash.”

My heart jumped into my throat.

“Now?”

She nodded.

“Romani wants to get the briefing out of the way, so that by the time it’s over, breakfast will have settled well enough that we can Rayshift you with all haste. I’m afraid the two week break is over, now.”

I took a deep, steadying breath.

“I understand. I’ll go get ready.”

“No rush,” Da Vinci told me. “The others will need time to get ready, as well, so don’t feel like you have to race to your room and grab anything that might be even vaguely useful. Take your time.”

She stepped around me and gave me a wave as she passed me by, walking back the way I’d come toward the cafeteria. Her footsteps on the floor echoed long after the curve of the hallway blocked her from sight.

Another short sigh huffed out of my nostrils, and dagger in hand, I continued my journey to my room until I came to a nondescript door alike to every other door in the facility, set apart only by the placard proclaiming, “TAYLOR HEBERT” above “MASTER CANDIDATE 9.” The door whooshed open, and I stepped into a room much like every other residential room in Chaldea: bland white walls, bland white ceiling, fluorescent bulbs that lit everything in a stark, white light.

Like every room, it had a frankly spartan and vaguely uncomfortable looking bed, a communications console set into one wall, and a closet where I kept my clothes and my puppets. My understanding of the situation was that I could have requisitioned a space for a workshop, but I wasn’t a magus by any stretch of the imagination, so I’d never seen the point.

There was also a desk with a laptop I’d requisitioned and a small sort of rack where my tea supplies were stored, but the real sign of personality was the bookcase Marie had gone out of her way to get for me. It was fairly basic and rudimentary, with copies of all my old favorites sorted neatly in no particular order, but the thing that made it special was that Marie had gotten it for me, for no other apparent reason than that I wanted one.

She’d *actually* apologized for not being able to find an appropriately aged antique, like that even mattered more than the fact she’d gone through the trouble of getting one at all.

I grimaced and looked away. This wasn’t a time to go getting sentimental over *furniture*.

The first thing I pulled out was the uniform that doubled as a mystic code. Someone had tried to put me in a skirt for it, but I hadn’t been amused at the suggestion that I go gallivanting through any form of combat zone in a pencil skirt and sheer hose, so pants it was. Next, I grabbed the comms device akin to the ones the twins had been wearing during Fuyuki, because I wasn’t going to be caught without that again, and slipped it onto my wrist.

Last... I looked down at the puppets I’d been trying to make work for the better part of the last year, and I left them in storage.

If I was a better mage, I might not have had any issues. I’d heard there were forms of magecraft that let you split your consciousness into partitions, and each partition could perform its own set of tasks simultaneously, but I didn’t have the first clue how to do that, and I just couldn’t leave the things on any form of autopilot. Controlling them all manually was too strong an urge to shake off, because I was just too used to that absolute control.

Without my passenger, however, splitting my mind along a dozen or more different paths just wasn’t possible.



With everything settled and ready and all my gear in place — including the newly reacquired knife now fastened to my belt — I shut the door to my closet and left my room, striding with purpose to my next stop.

I arrived at the Command Room without meeting anyone else in the hallway, and the door slid open to admit me, revealing the skeleton crew that was hard at work preparing for our next jump. Romani stood in the spot that belonged to the Director, where Marie should have been, poring over something on the tablet he held in one hand.

“Romani,” I greeted him.

He looked up.

“Oh, Taylor,” he said. “Good morning. You’re the first one here. Did you sleep okay?”

“Well enough.”

We fell into an awkward silence.

After a moment, as though to justify it, he said, “We’re waiting on the others to get here. We’ll go over the mission details when they do.”

“Right.”

We fell into another silence, and rather than try to fill it again, Romani turned back to whatever he was doing on his tablet. I didn’t bother, either, and just leaned up against the massive and needlessly oversized console, settling in to wait.

It didn’t help with the lingering frustration I was still carrying around, so I tried not to focus on the fact I was going to be leading two floundering newbies into what might very well be a warzone and instead think up different ways to handle the possible scenarios that might crop up in Orleans. Who we might wind up fighting, why, who might be our allies, and what to expect from the major powers in the area, at the time.

On second thought, scratch that. The longer we could avoid catching the eyes of either the French king or the British commanders, the better off things would be. My knowledge of the circumstances of the time was a bit spotty, but it wasn’t called the Hundred Years *Teaparty*. Neither side would take kindly to interlopers in strange clothes claiming to be from the distant future, not when witchcraft was one of the accusations that had been slung against Jeanne herself.

Of course, depending on who wound up in possession of the Holy Grail or what the deviation from proper human history was, confronting or collaborating with either side might wind up being unavoidable.

At last, the door slid open again, and in walked Ritsuka, Rika, and Mash, all suited up and ready to go themselves.

“Good morning, Mash, Ritsuka, Rika,” Romani greeted them warmly. “I hope you all had a good night’s sleep and ate breakfast, because we’re jumping right into things from here.”

Ritsuka glanced around. “We’re not bringing Emiya along?”

“For the time being, Emiya is staying here,” Romani answered. “Our position being what it is, we’d prefer not to overstress our systems, and we’re expecting Taylor to attempt a summon shortly after you arrive in Orleans. Nonetheless, he’ll be on standby, so if an emergency occurs, we can send him to join you as reinforcements. If you don’t have any other pressing concerns...?”

Nobody said anything. Romani nodded.

“Let’s get right into the briefing, then.”

He set his tablet down and turned to the console he stood in front of. His fingers danced across the touchpad keyboard, and a few seconds later, the three transparent panels that jutted up from the top of the console lit up, showing the map of the world in the center and two streams of unintelligible data on either side. A tap zoomed the map into the glowing dot planted in the middle of France.

“As I mentioned to you after Singularity F, we currently have data on seven more anomalous points in history. Of those seven, only two can be observed with high enough resolution to safely Rayshift the four of you. Since its deviation appears the mildest and its fluctuations are relatively stable, we’ve decided that the first Singularity we’re going to have you investigate takes place in Orleans during the year 1431. With me so far?”

A round of nods answered him.

“Good.” He went on, “The main goal of your expedition is to investigate the deviation itself and attempt to correct it. What exactly that means, we won’t be able to say until you’ve figured out what’s happening on the ground. However, considering the events of Singularity F, there’s a distinct probability that the deviation itself is the result of a Holy Grail, which means your secondary objective should actually coincide with your first. After all, strictly speaking, unless you’re the Lord Second, time travel is impossible without a Holy Grail.”

“What about Rayshifting?” Ritsuka asked. “Isn’t that time travel?”

“This and that are two different things,” Romani said. “Rayshifting might appear similar, but it’s not time travel in the conventional sense. I’d explain it further, but if I’m entirely honest, the exact mechanics of it make my head hurt, so just take my word for it, okay?”

Da Vinci chuckled quietly.

“Now,” he continued, “as I said, we don’t know it for certain, but it’s the best guess we’ve got. Having said that, you can’t just do one or the other, here. If you don’t either retrieve or destroy the Grail, then any efforts you make in correcting the distortion are meaningless. You have to do both in order to fix the Singularity.”

“Understood, Doctor Roman,” said Mash.

“I’ll need you to establish a summoning circle, too, using Mash’s shield,” Romani added. “The instant you get your bearings, I want you to set that up. Not only should Taylor attempt a

summoning right away, but without it, we won't be able to send you any supplies you might need in the field. Establishing that connection is going to be your first priority."

"Why doesn't Senpai just try before we go?" Rika asked. "I mean, we got Emiya just fine, didn't we? Couldn't she try summoning here, too?"

"A couple of different reasons," Romani answered. "Primarily, it's because I want to make sure the system will work outside of Chaldea's very controlled setting, but equally as important, you're very likely to summon a Servant related to the situation. Having someone who knows the lay of the land is going to be very useful for your mission. Now, if there are no other questions...?"

The twins looked around, but no one spoke up. Romani nodded.

"Excellent. I know it's sudden and we're moving really fast, but we're going to Rayshift you immediately. We've managed to get four coffins in working order for this, so I'd like you to please head down to the Rayshift chamber now."

"This way, boys and girls," Da Vinci said, and we filed in behind her as she led us out of the Command Center and in the direction of the Rayshift Chamber.

If I'd looked back, I was sure I would have seen Romani watching us leave, brow furrowed in that sort of constipated expression he got whenever he was worried.

A few minutes later, and the massive doors to the Rayshift Chamber slid open to admit our ragtag group.

"We didn't quite manage to get everything cleaned up, but the parts that need to be clear are clear, so please bear with it, for now," Da Vinci said, and indeed, there were still marks and scars from the sabotage, still debris and fallen ceiling tiles. My eyes, on their own, searched out the spot where I had been pinned two weeks ago, waiting to die a slow death as the fire choked me, and my stomach did a funny little flip.

The intercom crackled to life, and Romani's voice called down to us. "I know I'm repeating myself, but I'm going to go over this one more time for you all. The instant you get your bearings, establish a summoning circle and try to summon another Servant. Without the convenient framework of a Holy Grail War, there's no telling what sort of enemies you might wind up facing, so you need to bring in backup immediately. If we have no other choice, we'll send Emiya as reinforcements."

I craned my neck to look up at the Command Room, but the angle was all wrong and the windows had apparently been one of the first things repaired.

"That Romani," Da Vinci chuckled lowly, amused. "He's such a mother hen, isn't he? Don't worry, everyone. It's not that he thinks you've actually forgotten, but this is the only way he knows how to say that he's really nervous about this."

If he heard her, Romani didn't respond, and the floor beneath us opened up like a series of torpedo tubes. Four cylindrical devices rose up through them, things of metal with futuristic-looking designs and panes of what looked like glass over the front. The panes slid off the tubes and rose, showing the cushioned insides big enough for a grown man and then some.

“We managed to get these four coffins in working order,” Romani’s voice said again. “We’ve already tested them, and they’ve got full functionality, so don’t worry about it. Just step inside so we can start the process — properly, this time. Da Vinci, if you don’t want to be dragged along, I suggest you leave the Rayshift Chamber.”

Da Vinci grinned and waved him off. “What Romani isn’t telling you is that I fixed those up myself, so there’s nothing to worry about! They’re as good as new!”

“So we just...climb in?” Rika asked uncertainly.

“They were designed for someone much bigger and taller than you, so there’s plenty of room,” Da Vinci answered. “Don’t worry, they’re no more crowded than a subway car in Tokyo! It’s fine!”

“I’m not sure that’s as reassuring as you think it is,” Ritsuka mumbled, but he stepped into his a moment later anyway. Rika and Mash followed his lead, and I...

I eyed the metal tube and tried not to think of being squished into a high school locker, shut in with the muck and the grime, left to rot for over an hour. Before, when we’d been rushing to get ready to go to Singularity F, I hadn’t had time to think about it.

Now...

Me and tight spaces didn’t agree so much.

“Claustrophobic?” Da Vinci muttered sympathetically, so that the twins and Mash didn’t hear.

“Something like that,” I replied quietly.

There really wasn’t anything for it, was there? I wasn’t about to be beaten by a metal tube, not after everything.

The world didn’t end when I stepped inside my own coffin (and didn’t that sound morbid, out of context). The walls didn’t close in. I wasn’t crushed. Bugs and blood and *shit* didn’t bubble up from the bottom and drown me.

Now if only I could actually convince myself none of that was going to happen.

“Good luck, everyone,” Romani’s voice came. “Come back alive.”

The pane of glass slid back into place, and with a click, it locked. Da Vinci gave me a little smile and a wave and left, and I had to close my eyes and swallow against the panic starting to well up in my belly. I forced myself to take long, slow breaths, even as my heart pounded away in my ribcage and the world seemed to compress down to me and that tube, growing ever smaller.

It made me feel weak. Pathetic. All I’d done, all the steps I’d taken, all of the things, great and small, that I’d accomplished, and I was being brought low by a fucking piece of *Tupperware*.

The intercom crackled back to life and a neutral, computerized voice announced:

**UNSUMMON PROGRAM START**

**SPIRITRON CONVERSION START**

A cool sensation swept down my body, starting at the very top of my head and traveling all the way down to my fingers and toes. The glass of the coffin suddenly turned opaque, and I had to fight to keep my breathing under control so that I didn't hyperventilate right then and there.

Could they even call the whole thing off, at this stage?

I just had to hold on, hold on, *hold on* until it was over. Less than a minute. Thirty seconds, tops. I could do that.

**RAYSHIFTING STARTING IN 3...**

2...

1...

Light rushed up the coffin interior, streams of light, and the world fell away as I was pulled through a canal of stars, out into infinity. I looked out as my body was drawn along and gazed upon the cosmos, so grand, so vast, a symphony of wonder and majesty that made me feel so very small, so very humbled.

For an instant, I thought I saw something gaze back.

**ALL PROCEDURES CLEARED**

**GRAND ORDER COMMENCING OPERATION**