

## Chapter CXXVII: London Bound

The next week was spent in preparation. For the twins, that meant that nothing much changed, because their lessons continued — somewhat lighter than before, but they continued nonetheless — and so did Mash's swimming lessons. I doubted she would need them too much in the upcoming London Singularity, but on the off chance someone fell into the Thames, it would be good if she was able to rescue them — or herself, if an enemy decided to fling her into it.

That rescue swimming I'd added to the lesson plan might just come in handy.

For me, however, things were a lot busier. I spent most of my free time poring over everything I could get about London in the year 1888 and the late 19th century in general, from the political climate to the expected environmental conditions and everything in between, and to my frustration, I found exactly what I'd been told already: that in London in particular, nothing of all that much importance had happened that year. Nothing that our enemy would be interested in overturning, at any rate, which meant nothing we were going to have to pay special attention to preserving or restoring.

As ridiculous as it sounded, aside from the Jack the Ripper case, 1888 was a relatively uneventful year for London.

I also tried to get some more lessons with Aífe on runes, but there was a reason they had largely fallen by the wayside the last month or so. It really was like trying to learn a new language, with conjunctions and contractions and grammar that felt extremely alien to me, so while I had mostly memorized the shapes and could reliably carve several of them without trouble, the meanings of each individual rune were a bit harder to keep straight, and when it came to combining them, I was nearly hopeless.

Better than the twins, apparently, but I had two years of magecraft training on them, so I would hope I was at least good enough to have a leg up on them.

But it meant that gaining more skill was just a matter of practice and memorization, and until I had truly mastered the fundamentals, there wasn't much else she could teach me. Unfortunately, while learning to combine and synergize runes was like learning a language, it wasn't one that could be spoken, and so it wasn't one I could become more familiar with by immersing myself in it. In that sense, it was more like coding than regular language, and while I hadn't been incompetent at that, I was never a professional programmer either.

Once more, I couldn't stop myself from lamenting that Aífe had been summoned without her tutelary aspects. Being taught by a goddess of learning in her full glory would probably have made this child's play.

In lieu of being able to do it myself and improvise more during deployment, I asked her instead to spend some of her free time making us more flashbangs. I still had some that I hadn't used during Okeanos because so much of the fighting had been done on Drake's ship — meaning people, but especially us Masters, could have been knocked overboard by a blinded crewmate or injured by a flailing enemy, because of how close quarters everything had been — but keeping up a stock of them was a good idea and the twins should be carrying some around, too.

The doubloon that I'd almost forgotten about went into my desk. It wasn't lost on me how ridiculously valuable it was, not only as a collector's item, but also monetarily and as a catalyst for summoning Drake in the future. If I came out of this thing intact and didn't get whisked away by the Association once it was over, maybe I could find a museum that was interested in buying it from me.

The silk lines I'd woven in the background in Okeanos every chance I got were also packed away in my supplies. They weren't strong enough to do much of anything, not against a Servant at least, and since they weren't Black Widow silk, let alone Darwin's Bark Spider silk, I wasn't sure how well they'd hold up against anything else, but I was sure they'd come in handy at some point or another. Better to have them and never use them than need them and not have them.

Hopefully, I'd be able to get that spider puppet soon, and if not, then we'd find a good population of Black Widows in the American Singularity for me to bring back for my terrarium. Since Marie had given me permission, now it was just a matter of finding a good room where I could set it up, one with a strong bounded field that would keep whatever I brought into it docile and inside while I was on deployment.

The last thing I wanted was for one of those Black Widows to wander off and wind up biting Marie or one of the technicians. Da Vinci would probably be able to cook something up, but it would be better if she didn't have to, and somehow, I didn't think Romani was stocked up on antivenin.

For now, however, by the time the 14th rolled around, I was as ready to go for the next Singularity as I could be. I had armed myself with as much as I feasibly could in the time I had, including as much knowledge of the location and time period as I could find, and if the pattern held from the last few Singularities, it would all wind up entirely useless.

But that was familiar in its own way. It wouldn't be the first time I was forced to think on my feet and come up with a plan from nothing, and I was almost certain it wouldn't be the last either.

With the deployment set for eleven o'clock, getting up at eight gave me three hours to put on the finishing touches, so when my alarm went off, I rolled out of bed and made my way immediately to the shower. Like I always did right before we Rayshifted, I skipped out on the morning workout and instead went straight to breakfast after washing up, where Emiya was still getting some last minute cooking in before he handed the reins over to Marcus, and he gave me a relatively light meal — in consideration of how rough Rayshifting could be on us mere mortals.

"Ready for the next mission?" I asked as he piled my plate up with pancakes.

"If I said no, would that excuse me from going?" he asked wryly.

"I think Rika would have some choice words about that."

He chuckled lowly. "No doubt. She's not my most ravenous customer, nor my most demanding, but she's doing her level best to try."

More hints about his past? He'd said something like that before, too, and if I pried, he'd probably dodge around the subject again. Well. He was entitled to a secret or two, I guess, as long as it didn't come back to bite us later. It wasn't like I had much room to talk on that front.

I really was going to have to have that discussion with Marie. Especially with all that had been said about running into the Mage's Association in this next Singularity, getting clarity on what I couldn't and maybe *shouldn't* tell anyone else about my past was going to be important. Depending on what happened, telling the twins and Mash *something* might wind up unavoidable.

"You've spoiled us."

"It can't be helped." He shrugged. "I wasn't going to stand back and leave Marcus to carry the weight on his own, so there was nothing to be done about it."

Nothing to be done, indeed. For all that we'd been suspicious of him when he was first summoned, he kept proving that he was one of the best Servants we could have possibly called so early on into our Grand Order.

When he'd loaded up my tray, he bade me to "enjoy your breakfast," and went back to his duties as I stepped away to find an empty table.

'Find an empty table.' As though that had been anything resembling a difficult task for the past four months.

I made sure to eat slowly and savor my meal, knowing that keeping my stomach settled was going to be important in a few hours. I was about halfway through when the twins and Mash came in, making a beeline for Emiya, and got their own breakfast trays, and then they came over to my table and sat down with me.

"Good morning, Miss Taylor," Mash said serenely.

"Morning, Senpai," the twins muttered, still a little drowsy.

"Fou," the gremlin on Mash's shoulder chirped stiffly.

"Good morning," I replied to the three of them. I ignored the gremlin entirely.

"Man," Rika complained, "I got almost no sleep last night."

"Yeah," Ritsuka agreed. "I kept worrying I was going to forget something when we Rayshifted."

"Right?" said Rika. "It's crazy that it's actually kinda easier when we do the whole briefing thing right before we go!"

I allowed myself a little smile, hiding it by ducking my head to pretend I was looking down at my food. Things really had changed, hadn't they? Just a couple months ago, the idea of Rayshifting into another Singularity had terrified them, and they'd been quiet and withdrawn as a result. Now? You might have thought they were planning a camping trip and worried they were going to forget the tent.

"At least we're not carrying those e-bikes that Da Vinci made around," Ritsuka reminded her. "It's just one city, so we can walk everywhere instead."

Rika grunted. “Ugh. Don’t remind me. Orléans was the worst, but at least in Septem we had Super Action Mom and Queen Booty to drive us around. Having to walk all over the place is gonna suck!”

“It could be worse,” I told her.

“Worse?” Mash asked curiously.

“Senpai, no!” Rika said frantically, waving her hands and shaking her head. “Don’t tempt Murphy!”

“It could be like Fuyuki,” I said, ignoring her antics. “On fire.”

Rika groaned and dropped her head into her hands. “Now you’ve done it!”

“I think if something like that had happened, Miss Da Vinci and the others would have noticed it, Senpai,” Mash said, smiling awkwardly. “I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about.”

Ritsuka glanced at her dubiously. “I mean...there was that distortion they were talking about...”

“No!” Rika moaned into her palms. “Murphy, spare us! They know not what they do!”

I rolled my eyes.

“Fou-kyu-kyu fou.”

“See?” said Mash. “Even Fou is saying everything will be alright!”

I wasn’t sure that was what that thing had said at all.

“I’m glad someone here has faith in us, at least,” Arash said as he plopped down into the chair next to mine.

“Arash! Good morning!” said Mash.

“Morning, Mash.”

I glanced over at him. “The others?”

“Will be there to see us off,” he replied. “Bradamante was a bit bummed she wouldn’t be going on this one, but she *did* get her shot last time, so she can’t bring herself to complain about it.”

Ritsuka made a sound of understanding in his throat. “I understand why we can’t, but I kind of wish we could just bring everyone along.”

How much easier things might be if we could.

Rika sighed and let her hands drop. “I don’t look good as a mummy!” she announced.

“A lot of us feel the same way,” said Arash. “That’s why some of them are envious of Emiya and me, since we get to go along on every deployment. Siegfried won’t say so, but he’s really looking forward to when it’s going to be his turn.”

He phrased it as a statement, but he turned to me as he said it like it was a question. I hummed.

“I’ll bring it up with the Director. She and Romani are ultimately the ones deciding who gets deployed based upon the circumstances of the Singularity.”

“I’ll make sure to pass that along,” Arash promised. “But the Shadow Servant system that Da Vinci made helps. Even if they can’t be there for more than a single fight, being able to help at all makes being stuck here more bearable.”

Hence why Aife was completely content not to jockey for a slot. She had gotten the chance to fight both Caenis and Herakles in the last Singularity, and even if her Shadow form was a copy of a copy, the memories of those fights were likely no less intense for it. She was also likely to get more such chances in the future, as and when we faced a situation that called for her particular set of skills.

Maybe not so much on this one, though. If we wound up fighting indoors as much as Da Vinci seemed to think we would, then she would be extremely hampered in close quarters and unable to fight at her best.

“I’m glad,” said Ritsuka. “Sitting around here while we go off to fight must be pretty boring, so even if it’s something like that, it has to be better than nothing.”

Arash nodded. “Yeah.” He smirked. “It might help to have the simulator working for us again, too. That, however, is looking like something we’re just going to have to wait for a little bit longer.”

“Speak for yourself,” Rika said petulantly. “The instant that thing can handle Servants again, Senpai’s going to drag us into a scrimmage match, just you watch!”

I arched an eyebrow at her. “You don’t think we’re overdue for another exercise?”

“Never is too soon!” was her stubborn reply.

“I think it might be nice to have a team exercise like that,” Mash said diplomatically. “Wouldn’t it? Just have a friendly match together with everyone without any stakes or real consequences, where we can go all out without anyone getting hurt. It might help me figure out more about the Heroic Spirit inside me!”

I slid a glance her way as Rika said, “You’re a sweet summer child, Cinnabon, because Senpai’s team exercises are... well...”

“Traumatizing,” her brother finished for her.

Rika nodded. “Yeah! Exactly!”

I looked over at Arash, who looked back at me meaningfully. So I guess we were still keeping it secret, then. I knew it was something he had said Mash should figure out for herself, but there was going to come a point where it just got ridiculous. Hell, we’d already met another Knight of the Round Table, and he’d basically said the same thing, if not in so many words. If we met another, would they say that Mash needed to discover who she was playing host to on her own? That it was some spiritual journey she needed to complete to fully inherit his powers?

I backed down and the moment passed. Mash continued smiling, oblivious to the silent conversation Arash and I had just had.

There was a limit to how much I was willing to go along with that. I could let it go for now, and as long as it didn't get in the way, I guess I could keep letting it go for the foreseeable future. But if the fights kept getting harder and the enemies more bullshit, there was a point where keeping that secret was going to do more harm than good.

"I don't think Taylor would put you guys through the exact same sort of exercise a second time," Arash said like nothing had happened. "And besides, you're better Masters than you were back then, aren't you? It should be easier now if you had to do something like that again."

The twins traded a doubtful look. "See," began Rika, "you say that, Arash, but..."

"...the first lesson we learned from Senpai was not to underestimate Senpai," her brother concluded.

I couldn't stop the snort that ripped its way out of my nostrils.

"Senpai," Mash breathed like a sigh.

"Yeah," said Arash, smiling brightly, "I learned that lesson pretty fast, too."

"Fou-kyu-fou fou-kyu." Its beady little eyes stared at me doubtfully, and I wasn't going to engage with whatever nonsense it had just spouted, for the sake of my own sanity as much as anything else.

"As long as that's not the only lesson you learned from me," I said mildly. I pretended not to notice the look the twins exchanged with each other.

I finished my breakfast far ahead of everyone else, and as the conversation lulled and the twins dug into their breakfasts in earnest, I excused myself and took my dirty plate and glass back up to Emiya, who accepted them and passed them off to Marcus to be washed.

"Ready to go?" I asked him.

"When the time comes," he said. "For now, I'm just making sure that Marcus is a little better equipped while we're gone. I'll be on time, the same as I always am."

I had no reason to doubt him, so I just accepted him at his word. This was the same sort of song and dance he did before each of our other deployments, after all.

I was just out the door and starting to make my way back to the dorms to do a last minute check on everything when my communicator beeped to let me know I had a message. When I checked it, Da Vinci's neat script greeted me, reading:

*I know it's last minute, but I have something for you! Come to my workshop as soon as you can!*

Spinning on my heel, I turned in the other direction and started off for Da Vinci's workshop instead, wondering what she had for me. Maybe my ravens? She still hadn't given them back after

she asked me for them over a week ago, and I'd been getting kind of impatient about it over the last several days. After all, ravens and birds in general weren't a particularly unusual sight in a city like London, so they'd stand out a lot less than they would have in Okeanos, which meant they'd have a lot better utility in this next Singularity.

Although it might be a bit of a risk if the Association caught sight of them. I didn't really know how easily magi could identify another's familiars, but Marie had explained that any proper magus would be able to track the flow of magical energy between mage and familiar with some effort, so it was entirely possible they might get taken out like that.

Unless I kept them high enough. I wasn't clear on how sensitive magi in general were to the flow of magical energy, but a raven several hundred feet in the air was likely far enough away to escape notice.

Maybe it wasn't just that, though. Maybe Da Vinci had finally finished that spider puppet.

A thrill jolted through my stomach.

Now, *that* would be useful.

When I reached her workshop, it was to find Da Vinci flitting about, going to and fro across the room like a busy bee and adjusting various things, rifling through one pile of trinkets or another, and moving objects around whose purpose or function I had no earthly idea might be.

"Not helping out with the Rayshift?" I asked her.

Without looking over at me, she smiled and answered, "I trust the technicians to handle the bulk of the work for that by now. They've certainly had quite a bit of practice since this all started, no?"

Not enough to make emergency adjustments, apparently, because whenever we needed to do that, Da Vinci herself was the one to do it. I suppose, when you wanted to make sure something done on the fly was done right, you needed the professional who understood all of the settings and the programming to be the one to do it.

"Besides," she went on, "I'll be going to check their work shortly. If there are any mistakes, I'm sure I'll catch them without any trouble."

She was meticulous enough that I had no trouble believing it.

"You wanted to see me before that, though."

She nodded. "I did! I do have to apologize that it took longer than I expected it to, but I've been working on several projects for the future — a new function to the FATE System that we'll be testing after this deployment, but it's a surprise, so don't tell anyone — so I only just finished it last night."

She went off to one corner of the room and picked up a bag, then came back over towards the workbench in the middle of the room, where I joined her. When she set the bag down and nudged it

over towards me with a simple, “here,” I picked it up myself and immediately felt the extra weight. Considering what I’d been waiting for from her, there wasn’t much else it could be.

“My ravens?”

“Yes!” Da Vinci said proudly with another nod and a smile. “The bag, of course, I noticed had suffered some water damage in the Okeanos Singularity, and in hindsight, I should have planned for that from the beginning, so I’ve waterproofed it now! If you find yourself taking another dip, say, in a certain river, for example — although I would very strongly suggest against it, considering how badly polluted it was in that era — then you can at least expect your dear Huginn and Muninn to remain dry.”

That *was* a good upgrade. Not that I was planning on jumping into the Thames, because she was right about exactly how horrible an experience that would be, but if some other asshole decided to fling me into it or into another river or lake or something in a future Singularity, at least I wouldn’t have to dry the bag out afterwards.

But...

“Was this all you needed to give me?”

...that couldn’t have taken her a whole week to manage, could it? And if it had, why had she needed my ravens then?

Da Vinci’s smile broadened, stretching out her cheeks. “Of course not! No, no, the bag was a simple enough fix, it took me only about ten minutes to get that done. The real change, Taylor, was an upgrade I gave to your ravens. You remember you gave me that wonderful dagger of yours, yes? With the nanomachines that are built to chew through whatever they make contact with. Well, as you might imagine, considering I managed to repair it in the first place, I also reverse-engineered how they work!”

My brow furrowed. Was she saying...she put that same function into my ravens? Where, their claws? Their beaks? That...didn’t sound as useful as she might be imagining it was.

“You did?”

She nodded again. “I did! It took a little bit more effort to create my own from scratch and adjust their functionality, but I’m sure you’ll say the effort was more than worth it! You see, from using them to create your new mystic codes, I also learned how to make them repair *other* materials. I’m still working on ways to safely integrate them into human flesh, let alone Servants’ spiritual bodies, so I’m afraid that will have to wait a while longer, but for your ravens...”

Her eyes gleamed.

“Your ravens,” she said, and her smile was so broad it looked ready to split her face in half, “I’ve included a self-repair function. A core module about half the size of a pea, hidden in each of their vertebrae, that will use nanomachines to repair any damage your ravens happen to take. Rather ingenious, no?”



Holy shit. “Really?”

A self-repair function? One that was embedded in every single section of the spine, so that it couldn't be destroyed just because one particular segment happened to be damaged?

“Yes!” Da Vinci said brightly. “Originally, it was going to be a single core module each, but that would be too easy to accidentally disable, wouldn't it? No, no, better to make it act like bone marrow, so that as much of the skeleton as possible featured redundant modules to enable them to repair themselves — even other damaged modules! As long as those ravens of yours aren't completely obliterated, then a little time and mana will let them be right as rain!”

My fingers curled into the fabric of the bag. It was her job, I knew that. She was here to support the team, to keep things running, and to make sure our equipment was the best she could possibly make it. She would probably have done something like this for any of the Masters, if there were still any left besides me and the twins, just like she had made those new mystic codes for the three of us.

But it still felt special. Like a personal gift made just for me.

“Thank you.”

She waved it off. “It was no trouble, truly! Why, if it wasn't for you and that incredible knife, I wouldn't have been able to make something like that in the first place! Really, I think I should be the one thanking you. Or perhaps whoever it was who happened to make that knife.”

Another time, the unsubtle dig for information might have annoyed me. But on the back of such good news — that Huginn and Muninn were becoming ever closer to indestructible — I couldn't help but to smile, because...

“You would have liked them. And they, you, I think.”

Da Vinci sighed, but didn't stop smiling, and shrugged. “It was worth a shot, I suppose.”

The idea of what they could have gotten up to together, on the other hand... Well. They would have made an absolutely terrifying team. Just thinking of what they could have come up with working together was frankly a little dizzying to imagine.

I tried to banish the image of Ritsuka in power armor from my head, but it refused to go away completely.

“Was there anything else?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “Not right now, I'm afraid. I've been trying to work on that spider puppet of yours, but the spinnerets are a little finicky. It's taking more effort than I expected to get them working properly and producing silk of the correct consistency and tensile strength. Once I've gotten it figured out, however, you should be able to make just about any kind of silk you could imagine, including braided threads of it, in fact.”

It was disappointing to hear, but if it was as versatile as she was implying, then I could afford to wait until it was finished.

“Can you make more than one?”

“With the amount of resources I have left from what we gathered for the Director’s new body?” She hummed thoughtfully. “Perhaps a total of ten. I realize it’s not much compared to what you’re normally used to commanding out on missions, but I think the sheer utility of each one will more than make up for it, yes?”

Maybe not as much as she might think. No matter how high the quality of the silk was, I still ran into the inevitable problem of trying to use it on a Servant that wouldn’t be particularly impressed by it, but at the very least, it would make it easier to weave cloth for whatever purposes I might need.

“What about venom options?” I asked instead.

“Ah,” said Da Vinci. “I suppose that’s not off the table either. It wouldn’t be *actual* venom, but making a potion that could mimic the effects and placing it into an internal reservoir... It would mean having to refill that reservoir periodically after using up the stored potion, but it’s not outside the realm of impossibility. Did you have something specific in mind?”

“A tranquilizer,” for use on more human enemies so we didn’t have to resort to more lethal measures, “and something like sphingomyelinase D, designed specifically to disrupt spiritual bodies,” for use against Servants.

Da Vinci winced. “You’re certainly not holding back, are you? I can’t promise that anything like that I cooked up would be all that effective against Servants, but I can assure you that it would at least do *something*.”

“That’s fine.”

I was under no illusions that I could so easily kill a Servant, even with access to something like that. But if it could distract them? If it could slowly unravel their body while they fought, slowing them down and weakening them? Against a Servant who didn’t have a way of resisting its effects, it could give us an edge that we might not have otherwise had.

It was, at least, more than I could do currently. If we ever ran into another situation like Okeanos, where a swarm of any appreciable size was all but impossible to build, then having *something* useful would help me feel a little less useless.

“It’ll take a little longer, but it should definitely be doable.” Da Vinci glanced at something on her staff. “For now, however, I think you and I have other responsibilities we should be seeing to, yes?”

I checked the time. A little over an hour until we were scheduled to Rayshift into the London Singularity — plenty of time to get a few last minute things done, if I’d had any, but I could take the hint she was trying to give me well enough.

“Right. I’ll see you in about an hour.”

Gathering up the bag and slinging it over my body, I turned around to leave.

“See you then!” she called after me.

At the door, I paused and looked back at her. “Da Vinci?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks again.”

She smiled at me. “It was no trouble, Taylor.”

I left her workshop behind and made my way back to the dorms for a final equipment check. Not that I expected to find anything missing or out of order, but it was a way to occupy the time for a little while, and when that was done, I let myself relax and cracked open the latest novel I was reading. Trying to get as far in as I could before I had to put it down for who knew how long.

Before I knew it, most of the hour had passed and my alarm was going off, so I marked my place, set the book aside, and grabbed my things, and then I left my room and made my way towards the Command Room for the final briefing. Halfway there, Arash greeted me with a wave and a smile, then fell into step with me as we walked.

“So,” he said. “London, huh. Can’t say I’ve ever been.”

“Considering the time period, I’m not sure you’ll find it all that interesting.”

“Yeah?”

“It was prone to fog,” I told him, “and smog, from industrial waste and other kinds of air pollution. All of the environmental hazards made people sickly and weak and cut down on the life expectancy of the average Londoner. Up until things got so bad that the government had to start putting in actual environmental protections in the 1950s, it was a miserable place with a whole host of problems, and considering the time period, I don’t hold out any hopes that it’s going to be all that pleasant.”

I had no idea exactly how bad it was going to wind up by the time we got there, but Brockton had had its fair share of rundown spots smeared with human waste and unwashed druggies either high or looking for their next fix. If London wound up anywhere near that bad, the smell was probably going to stick in my nostrils for *weeks* afterwards.

“Sounds like a fun place to vacation,” Arash teased with a chuckle.

I wasn’t sure that was quite the right way to put it.

“I’m not sure ‘fun’ is the word I’d use.”

“Maybe not,” he allowed, “but there’s going to be a lot of people there, isn’t there? I’m sure, for them, it’s their home, and whatever we’re there to fix, we’ll be saving all of them from it, won’t we?”

For a second, I stopped, because he actually had a point. Victorian London might be a cesspool of inequality, pollution, and a whole host of other problems, but for the people living there, it was home, and for most of them, the only one they’d ever known. A lot of them wouldn’t want to live anywhere else, no matter how bad it got.

Not even if a Biblical sea monster came in and wrecked it.

“You’re right,” I admitted. “So I guess we’ll just have to be careful not to do too much damage while we’re there, won’t we?”

Even if it was all fixed after everything was over, even if no one would remember what happened once it was all corrected, that didn’t make it any less cruel to disregard the people in the city or their homes.

Somehow, I doubted the enemy was going to be quite so considerate.

Just as we were about to turn down the hall to the Command Room, however, Arash suddenly shifted into spirit form without any warning whatsoever, and I turned to where he’d been, bewildered. Before I could even open my mouth to ask, he reached across our bond and told me, *Just keep going, Master.*

My brow furrowed, but I listened, and when I rounded the corner, I realized what he must have seen coming before me, and my gut clenched to see Marie hunched over herself just outside the door to the Command Room. I walked up to her, making no effort to muffle my footsteps, until I stood even with her.

“Marie?” I asked quietly.

She didn’t answer right away, didn’t even look at me or acknowledge I was there at all, and for several seconds, she was silent.

Then, so quietly I almost didn’t hear her, “What if…”

She trailed off. I didn’t need her to finish, not when I already knew what she was trying to say.

“It won’t,” I told her confidently, low enough that no one inside the Command Room could hear me. “Nothing will go wrong with the Rayshift. The twins, Mash, and I will be okay. You, Romani, and the rest of the staff will be okay. We’ll all be fine.”

“But they…” she bit out. “The curse… What if we’re not…”

*Not as safe as we think we are?*

Her hands were curled tightly around her tablet, so I reached out and gently nudged her hip with my knuckles.

“And even with that curse, we still beat them just the same, didn’t we? Ritsuka and Jeanne Alter came out of it none the worse for wear,” I pointed out. “They threw everything they had at us, and the only thing that stuck is something they can’t do again. Because if it was that easy, they would have done it already. Especially after how many of their plans we’ve ruined.”

For another few seconds, she was silent.

“What if you’re wrong?” she asked. “What if…if they’re just biding their time?”

“We have a dragon-slayer. A Celtic warlord. A knight in shining armor. A demigod. A modern hero who can mass produce *Noble Phantasms*. And the greatest genius of the past thousand years is micromanaging the entire facility. Anything they try to throw at us? We’ll beat it. They’re not catching us by surprise again.”

I wasn’t sure she was convinced. I wasn’t sure she could be, not until those niggling doubts were proven wrong.

I leaned closer. “And now, we need our Director. She’s the one holding us all together.”

“Is she really?” Marie asked tremulously. “She can barely hold herself together! Romani is...”

“Romani wasn’t doing much better,” I said, remembering how many days he’d spent shuffling around like the walking dead. “And there’s at least one person here who wouldn’t be if it wasn’t for you. I’ll remind you of that as many times as you need me to, Marie, because the only reason I made it this far is because of you. You believed in me when no one else did, so now I’m going to believe in you even when you don’t believe in yourself.”

She took a shuddering breath, and like it was some terrible secret, whispered, “I don’t deserve it.”

For a single instant, a black, terrible hate erupted in my gut — at Marisbury, at Lev and Flauros, the ones who had done this to her — and I extinguished it with the cold, visceral satisfaction that they were all gone and couldn’t come back. She wasn’t free of them, and she wasn’t free of the wounds they’d inflicted on her, but they couldn’t inflict fresh ones.

“I don’t believe that,” I told her, “and no one else here believes it either. They’re all in the next room —” I nodded my head towards the door — “waiting for their Director to lead them. We can’t start without her. Is she ready to go?”

She sucked in another shuddering breath. “I have to be...don’t I?”

She squared her shoulders back and straightened her spine, pulling one more deep breath in through her nose, and then she set her face into one of fierce confidence. It was a mask so fragile that I thought it might have broken if I reached out to touch it.

“I’m right behind you.”

I stepped back to give her space, and she nearly faltered right there, but she took a bracing breath, lifted her head, and turned towards the door. When she walked — all false bravado and borrowed strength — the door whooshed open ahead of her, and I followed in her wake, there to catch her if she fell.

She didn’t. There was a moment of hesitation the instant she stepped into the Command Room, and then something almost magical happened and she fell into the role of Director like it was natural.

“Romani!” she snapped off.

Romani turned to her, and like nothing was wrong, offered her a smile, “Ah, good morning, Director!”

All of the other Servants, who were already gathered and waiting, echoed him, some (like Bradamante) more enthusiastically than others, and we all exchanged pleasantries. We'd barely finished and Marie didn't even have a chance to ask about anything before the twins and Mash arrived and walked through the door — with the gremlin in tow, of course. Arash brought up the very rear, catching my eye for a brief moment, as though promising to keep the secret of what had just happened.

“Good morning, everyone!” Mash greeted brightly.

A chorus of “good morning” answered her, and once it had died down, Marie cast an eye out at the assembled group, like she was reassuring herself that we were all there and healthy. I doubted I was the only one who noticed her gaze linger a few extra seconds on Ritsuka.

“Good!” she said, and her voice barely trembled. “We're all here. Then we can begin!” Her voice gained confidence and strength as she went. “First off, we'll go over what to expect of the upcoming Singularity...”

And she recapped what we'd discussed in the previous briefing: that our destination was London, during the year 1888, and that the Singularity encapsulated only the city itself. That there was a distortion affecting the sensors, but with the new information that it subsided in what would be the early morning, so we had enough of a grasp of the shape of things to know that the layout of the city remained as it had in proper history. That the circumstances, as always, were unknown, and our job was to correct whatever had been thrown off and retrieve the Holy Grail at the center of things. That we should be especially careful of the Mage's Association of that era and had full permission to do whatever it took to protect ourselves from any of their predations.

“As was decided upon before, we'll be sending the Masters together with Mash, Emiya, Arash, and Jeanne Alter,” Marie concluded. “If you have any questions, you should have asked them a week ago!”

In the background, El-Melloi II snorted and Emiya huffed a quiet laugh. No one spoke up to ask anything. Marie nodded.

“Good! Then it's time for the next deployment. Everyone, get to your positions! Team A, to the Rayshift Chamber!”

This time, I definitely wasn't the only one to notice the slip.

“Right!” the twins and Mash said.

“And get Sherlock Holmes autograph for me if you can!” Romani called after us.

Mash sighed.

“I'm afraid that's going to be quite difficult, Romani,” Da Vinci said, amused. “He's a fictional character, remember?”

“Oh. Right...”

“Don’t worry,” Jeanne Alter tossed back at him, smirking, “I’ll make sure to get his autograph for you, Doc!”

Romani plastered on an awkward smile. “R-right, thanks!”

“Good luck, Master!” Bradamante bade us. “And Master! A-and Master, too! And Lady Mash, as well!”

The door whooshed shut behind us, and together, we made our way down to the Rayshift Chamber. It looked no different from any of the other times we’d been inside of it, with four pods, four coffins, jutting up out of the floor, lids raised for us Masters and Mash. Da Vinci, who had followed us down, told us, “Just like before, everyone. No new procedures you need to worry about, so just step inside and get ready to Rayshift.”

Rika sighed. “No new procedures means it’s going to be just like the last four times.”

“I guess it’s a good thing we didn’t have a big breakfast then,” said Ritsuka. “Aren’t you glad I stopped you from getting seconds?”

Rika stuck her tongue out at him, and Da Vinci chuckled.

“Sorry we can’t make things a little easier on you,” she said, smiling.

“What’s the matter, Master?” Jeanne Alter asked, grinning. “Scared of a little metal tube?”

“You would be too if you had to worry about your stomach rebelling every time you Rayshifted,” Rika grumbled.

The intercom crackled to life. “What’s taking you so long? Get in your coffins already!”

Ritsuka grimaced, but obeyed, moving towards his coffin. “That sounds really weird out of context.”

“Everything does,” I commented as I went over to mine. I tried not to think too much about climbing inside of it as I did, because if I spent too long and too much thinking about being inside a small metal tube —

*Stop thinking about it*, I told myself. It didn’t help.

“London bridge is falling down,” Rika sang to herself while she got into hers, “falling down, falling down...”

Da Vinci chuckled again as she made the rounds, checking that we were each secured inside our coffins — it felt like she barely looked me over before moving on — and then she was gone. The massive doors rumbled shut behind her. The lid to my coffin slid down, the lock whirred and clicked, and then the glass turned opaque and I was left in the darkness, alone but for my ravens hugged to my chest in their bag.

I shut my eyes tight, but it did little to help the clawing, irrational fear scrambling for purchase in my gut. Fuck, I hated that this still got to me like this.

Once more, the intercom crackled to life.

**UNSUMMON PROGRAM START**

**SPIRITRON CONVERSION START**

A chill swept down my body, just as it always did, and despite the echoes of trauma that were still gnawing at my insides, a jolt of excitement leapt through my belly.

*Passenger? Are you ready?*

There was no response. There was never a response. I had little doubt that it still heard me.

**RAYSHIFTING STARTING IN 3...**

**2...**

**1...**

Bright light swept up and down my coffin, and a moment later, I fell — out through a hole in reality, along a canal through a sea of stars. The twinkling lights passed me by as streaks of glittering white.

**ALL PROCEDURES CLEARED**

**GRAND ORDER COMMENCING OPERATION**