

## Chapter CXXVIII: The Misty City

Every time, I struggled to really encapsulate the experience of Rayshifting. To capture what it was like in a way that could be expressed through words, as though that was really possible.

Whatever else I thought of her, there were times when Alexandria was right. That sometimes, language was limited. Sometimes, there weren't any words to say what you wanted to say.

For a moment, Taylor Hebert didn't exist. I was alive and dead at the same time, vacillating between them as a second stretched into an eternity that compressed back into a second. I was aware that I wasn't aware, conscious of the fact that I wasn't conscious, my mind spread out across infinity as the world fell away and the universe opened up like a flower in bloom. I was the honey bee exploring its petals, flitting about from galaxy to supernova to black hole.

And that was all complete nonsense. The fact that I could even remember that glimpse behind the curtain of reality enough to say anything at all about it probably had something to do with my passenger, but the why and the how of it, I could only guess. If I let myself be honest about it, it was probably just my human brain trying to make sense of something that I didn't have the ability to really grasp, like the flow of entropy in reverse or something.

Gravity suddenly reasserted itself, and I landed on solid ground with so little warning that my body almost pitched over from the shock of it. There was no impact, not really, which felt incredibly strange when everything my senses told me said that my knees should be aching and my feet throbbing.

"Is it just me," Rika said weakly from nearby, "or was that one way worse than normal?"

"It's not just you," her brother replied.

"Maybe the distortion affected the calculations for the Rayshift?" Mash suggested.

Rika groaned. "At least tell me we're still in London and not Paris or something!"

I opened my eyes. High above in the sky, the midday sun shone down on us, bright and glaring, and there, up there with it —

Mash gasped. "The ring of light!"

— was the same phenomenon we'd seen in Orléans and Septem, although I didn't remember checking for it in Okeanos. If it was here, too, then I had no doubt it must have been, even if we hadn't ever looked to make sure.

Down below, however, here on the ground with us...

"It's definitely London," I said confidently.

...a faint mist hovered over the street, thin and moist and nipping at our ankles. To be expected, for a city that was famous for being foggy and miserable, and those structures in the distance, barely

more than vague blobs from here, looked like they could have come out of a history textbook. I took in a breath — and almost gagged.

“Oh, god, what’s that stench?” Rika said, disgusted. “Did someone let one rip? Onii-chan, was that you?”

Ritsuka sent her an annoyed glare. “Yes, Rika, that was me. I had some expired milk with breakfast today, and that’s why it smells so bad.”

“I’m just saying!”

This was too much for something as simple as someone passing gas. Not only was the smell utterly horrid, the stench of it burned in the back of my throat, clinging to my sinuses. From how bad it was, I wouldn’t have been surprised if someone had told me my nose hairs had been singed off.

Mash gave an experimental sniff, grimacing, and had to hold a hand up to her nose. “It’s sulfur,” she said, muffled by her palm. “Given the time period, it’s probably pollution as a result of industrial waste, Senpai.”

“This is definitely London,” said Emiya. There was something almost wistful in his voice. “I guess, even over a hundred years later, it doesn’t change that much, does it?”

“So it’s just as shitty a hundred years from now, huh?” Jeanne Alter drawled. Her nose wrinkled as she looked about.

Emiya chuckled. “I guess that’s one way to put it.”

“It could be worse,” Arash said, smiling. “It could be on fire, right?”

Rika groaned as Ritsuka laughed a little. Jeanne Alter grinned. “I can fix that if you want, Master.”

“Sorry, no,” said Ritsuka. “We’re here to save this city, right? We can’t do that by burning it to the ground.”

“There’s a lot of problems you can fix by burning them down,” Jeanne Alter insisted, and then she shrugged. “But whatever. Don’t say I didn’t offer if you change your mind later.”

*Beep-beep!*

When I answered my communicator, a burst of static was the first thing to greet me, and I winced against the noise as it screeched out.

“...hear me?” Da Vinci’s voice asked, tinny and warped. “...distortion...linked to the fog...some way.”

“Da Vinci-chan?” Rika said. “You’re breaking up!”

“And not a tunnel in sight, right?” Ritsuka teased her. She stuck her tongue out at him.

“We’re...trouble hearing you,” Da Vinci said. “The fog...disrupting...communications. The thicker...harder...us to reach...”

The distortion was linked to the fog, and it subsided in the early morning, but presumably came back in the afternoon and into the evening. I glanced at the mist, which wasn’t especially thick right now, but it was chilly and felt like it was stealing the warmth from my body whenever it snuck up my pants legs and touched my bare skin.

They’d also said in the briefing that the time differential between this Singularity and Chaldea was much closer to one to one, so if we Rayshifted out of Chaldea in the late morning, then that was about what time it should have been in London, too, wasn’t it? So this wasn’t the mist being driven back, this was the fog rolling back in.

“We understand, Da Vinci,” I said as slowly and clearly as I could. There was no way to be sure how much of it she even heard.

“The fog...thicker...we speak,” Da Vinci went on. “Once...thick enough...be impossible. We...able to...contact...at all. You’ll...your own.”

“— isten!” Marie’s voice interjected. “...only way...stay in contact...you...Ley Line Terminal! Find...soon...possibly can!”

The line fizzled and abruptly disconnected. My brow furrowed, but after several seconds, my communicator remained silent.

“Uh, guys?” Rika said uncertainly. “Is it just me, or is that fog getting thicker?”

She pointed down the road and into the distance, where the mist was slowly growing — both more opaque, thicker, and also upwards, slowly creeping up the brickwork of the nearby buildings like a blanket being pulled over the city.

Brockton wasn’t immune to its own bouts of fog, but I’d never seen one come on this quickly. With just how fast it was thickening and expanding, it wouldn’t take long at all for it to reach us, too, and if it kept growing thicker, it was entirely possible for us to lose track of each other if we let ourselves get separated.

Worse, the insect population was distributed...weirdly. In the nearby homes, they thrived, as expected of a city that had problems with cleanliness and had just recently installed a proper sewer system. Out on the streets, however? There was nothing. Not a single bug of any kind was outdoors, and any that could stretch that definition only stretched it by hiding out under enclosed stairways. It was almost as though they were afraid to come out into the fog.

Was this a natural London thing, the sort that happened on its own in normal history, or was the fact this fog was linked somehow to the distortion that was disrupting our communications with Chaldea a sign that this wasn’t in any way natural, but instead the actions of some other force? Could it have something to do with the entire reason we were here in the first place?

Immediately, I reached for my supply pouch and pulled out a length of silk cord.

“Group up!” I ordered the rest. I kept an eye on the fog, and alarmingly, it was expanding even faster now than it had been a minute ago.

That all but confirmed it. This was almost certainly enemy action.

“Ritsuka, Rika, Mash,” I said as they all gathered towards me, and I handed the other end of the thread to Ritsuka, “tie yourselves off so we don’t get separated. Everyone, stick together. The last thing we want is for anyone to get lost. The fewer Command Spells we need to use to make sure we’re all in the same place, the better.”

“What?” Jeanne Alter laughed. “Are you afraid of a little fog?”

“No,” Emiya said grimly, “that’s no natural fog. The Director said the distortion subsides every morning and then builds up again afterwards, right? And Da Vinci said the fog is linked to the distortion. Normal fog isn’t nearly that regular, which means —”

“Something else is causing it,” Arash concluded, and now he was on guard, too. “Emiya, can you take point? I’ll cover the rear.”

“Screw that!” said Jeanne Alter, and she pushed her way to the front of the group, flickering in and out of spirit form to bypass the cord us Masters were tying to our belts. “I’ll take point, you pansies!”

She drew her sword.

“Let’s see how this big, scary fog feels about a little *fire!*”

She swung upwards, and a gout of flame leapt from the path of her blade — only to fizzle out almost the second it hit the incoming fog bank. As though personally offended, the fog closed in faster, and the first wave of it tickled at my shoes and ankles.

“What the fuck?” she squawked. She gestured at the fog bank. “You idiots saw that, too, right?”

“*Definitely* not natural,” Emiya said with a grimace. “I think we’ve found our first clue about what’s going on in this place.”

“Which means it has a source,” I said, mind already working. “If it’s not natural, then it’s like you said: that means someone or something is creating it. The question is where, why, and how.”

“If this fog really is covering the whole city, then I don’t think it’s going to be easy to answer those,” said Arash.

On that, he had a very good point. It was a lot of ground to cover, and if my sense of how socioeconomic stratification worked in a city like this was any good, then the fact we seemed to be in the poorer section of town meant we were likely closer to the outskirts of the city than the center.

And the fog? It looked like it was coming from somewhere much closer to the center. Deeper in, towards the more affluent sections of town. There were a lot of places that could correspond to, but there were already a few that I could think of that we should probably start searching. Like

Buckingham Palace or the Tower of London, or even Big Ben, depending on how high up they needed to be to get this fog really rolling.

“At least it looks like we have a heading.”

Rika did a double take. “Wait. You want to go *into* the fog?”

The ‘are you nuts?’ was implicit.

“Oh,” said Ritsuka. “That makes sense. If the fog is coming from that direction, then whoever is behind it is probably somewhere over there, aren’t they?”

“Exactly.”

“Alright,” said Rika, sounding very unenthusiastic, but resigned to it anyway. “Looks like we’re going into the creepy fog then. Where anything could jump out at us. At any moment. And we’d never see it coming.”

“You don’t need to worry, Master,” said Mash. “No matter what happens, I’ll protect you.”

“And we’re here, too,” Emiya added.

That was when the fog hit us properly, slamming into our group like a wave and washing over us in an instant. I took in a sharp breath at the sudden bracing cold that hit my cheeks — and nearly pitched over sideways as my knees threatened to buckle underneath me.

“Oh god,” Rika gagged, and my own throat convulsed reflexively, “it’s *worse!* I didn’t think it could get *worse!*”

My eyes watered, and I held a hand up to my face to cover my nose, but it didn’t help. The rancid smell invaded my nostrils and slithered down the back of my throat, burning all of the soft tissues as it went. It was bad enough that I wasn’t sure exactly how metaphorical that was.

“Oh dear.” Mash held her free hand up to her nose and mouth, too, but it didn’t look like it was helping her any more than it did me. “This is... Could it be that this is the result of the enemy making the infamous London smog worse? I-I don’t think it was supposed to get this bad for another sixty years.”

“Fou...” the little gremlin said pitifully, burying his snout in her neck. Vindictively, I thought he probably had it the worst out of all of us.

“It figures London would be this fucking toxic,” said Jeanne Alter, nose wrinkled in disgust. “Ugh. Why did I even agree to come along for this one?”

“Is it even safe for us to be out in this?” Ritsuka asked, his voice muffled by his own hand.

My vision blurred. I blinked the tears out of my eyes, but it didn’t clear up entirely. The fog was so bad it was burning my eyes, too. Fuck. Were we going to have to put up with this for the entire time

we were here? Or were we going to have to limit ourselves entirely to the times when the fog subsided and the air was clear enough for us to breathe without any trouble?

“Maybe not.” My lungs seized, but I fought down the urge to cough. It wouldn’t help in this situation. “But we don’t have anywhere to set up a base yet, and we can’t use one of these houses for that, so we need to go deep...deeper into the city.”

Ritsuka nodded. “Yeah. I don’t think any of these people would appreciate us just barging in, would they? We should try to find an empty building. Maybe a bakery or something? Bread is better than no food at all, right?”

None of that was wrong, but I didn’t bother to correct him right now, not when I felt another cough trying to force its way out of my chest. No matter what, we were probably going to have to inconvenience someone, it would just be better if that someone happened to live in more secure housing. Somewhere with more space, where an extended family wasn’t all cramped together in an apartment meant for much fewer people, and where the roof wasn’t in any danger of falling in on our heads.

Rika shivered. “Do you think we could find someplace with indoor heating? Or at least a fireplace?”

“Don’t worry, Rika,” Emiya told her. “I have a few things I can make to heat the place up, if we need it. I think the important thing is to just find someplace safe, first and foremost.”

“Y-yeah,” I managed to grit out. “So let’s...let’s get moving.”

“The sooner we can get out of this fog, the better,” Arash agreed.

“Tch.” Jeanne Alter scoffed. “I’m still taking point.”

“And Mash will be right behind you,” said Ritsuka. “Right, Mash?”

Mash nodded firmly. “Right!”

So we started walking — slowly, but walking nonetheless. We followed the road in the direction the fog had arrived from, and although it was harder without any bugs out on the streets to give me a sense of where everything was, the bugs in the nearby houses still provided a kind of runway to give me a sense of where the housing ended and the streets began. It wasn’t anywhere near as complete a map of my surroundings as I’d gotten used to in places like Brockton or Chicago, and for Orléans and Septem, it couldn’t even come close, but it was more than I’d had in Chaldea, Fuyuki, and most of Okeanos, so that was already an improvement.

The fog, unfortunately, never dissipated. In fact, I was pretty sure it was getting thicker as we went, and while the thread connecting us made it so none of us Masters got separated, it got harder and harder to see with my actual eyes what was going on in front of us. Not only because the fog was so thick, but because my eyes were almost constantly watering from the sting of whatever was in that fog, and my vision kept deteriorating.

The burn in my throat and down into my chest didn’t get any better, either. Eventually, no matter how much I tried to keep it down, the urge to cough won out, and I had to stop and give into it.

Naturally, everyone else stopped with me. If they hadn't heard me hacking, then the sudden tension in the silk line probably would have gotten their attention.

"Senpai?" Ritsuka asked.

"I-I'm fine," I managed around the feeling of glass scraping my esophagus.

Emiya and Arash traded a look, no doubt about me. I wasn't sure how much anyone else believed me either.

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

"I-I'm fine," she said, although she sounded miserable. "That might change if I have to smell this for too long, though. Ugh. I thought the Rayshifting was bad!"

"Are *you* okay, Senpai?" asked Mash.

Ritsuka nodded, grimacing around his hand. "It really does smell horrible, but besides that, I'm okay. We need to keep going, don't we?"

"The sooner we get out of this shit, the better," Jeanne Alter muttered testily.

I nodded, ignoring the way my vision swam a little, and swiped at my eyes to try and wipe away the reflexive tears. Frustratingly, it didn't really help.

"Let's... Let's go."

We started moving again. Mercifully, it turned out that the fog wasn't consistent all throughout, because we did occasionally hit spots that were thinner where things let up a little bit, but the opposite was also true, because we ran into spots that were thicker, too, and all the worse for it. I tried not to show it, especially since the twins were handling it so well — I was proud of them for that, I really was — but the smell was giving me a headache, and in those thicker spots, it was bad enough to make me dizzy.

This had to be worse than how things were in proper history. I'd read that the people of London faced all sorts of health problems in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, about their sickly nature, their weaker constitutions, and their pallid complexions, how their growth was stunted, and how thin and feeble they tended to be, but there was a world of difference between any of that and living with *this* every day for their entire lives.

It explained why everyone seemed to have retreated indoors, at least. They must all have realized that there was something off about this, something unnatural, and whether it was prudence or superstition, that had driven them off the streets and into their homes.

It wasn't long before I had to stop and cough again. This time, it felt like one of my lungs was trying to force its way up my throat as my chest convulsed.

"Senpai?" Ritsuka asked again, a note of concern in his voice.

“It’s —”

But before I could get the word out, I was seized by another fit and had to bend nearly double, covering my mouth with my hand. Something warm and wet splattered onto my palm, and frustrated and disgusted, I flicked my hand jerkily and flung the phlegm off onto the ground. The only thing I could taste in my mouth was the acrid sulfur that was clogging up my nose and clinging to what felt like every single one of my tastebuds.

*Master? Arash prodded across our bond gently. Are you sure you're alright?*

I tried to look over at him, but in the fog, with this patch as dense as it was and my eyes still incessantly watering, all I saw was a vague blur of mottled colors that matched him and his armor.

*No, I admitted only to him, but there's nothing we can do about it right now, is there?*

I couldn't even tell if he frowned or not.

“Maybe it’s an allergies thing?” Rika suggested. “I mean, this sucks and I’m gonna be smelling this for *weeks* after this is over, but Senpai’s the only one so bad off. Onii-chan and I are okay.”

“I don’t think it’s that,” Mash said quietly. “This mist...it’s so full of magical energy that I’m not sure I could even tell if a Servant walked right past us.”

“She’s not wrong,” Emiya agreed. “As Servants, we’re fine, but for living human beings, this could be dangerous. Her reacting more strongly might have to do with anything from the composition or quality of her magic circuits to her elemental alignment being a poor matchup, and without the Doctor or Da Vinci to tell us what the sensors are saying, there’s no way to know for sure one way or the other.”

Mash checked her communicator, but after a second or two, there was nothing on the other end. “I can’t reach Doctor Roman or Miss Da Vinci. It seems the fog really is making it impossible for us to contact them.”

My lips pulled down, and with a bit of effort and the mental snap of a spider’s thread, I started circulating magical energy through my magic circuits. It didn’t help as much as I was hoping it would, only made the breathing a little bit easier, but it would be better than nothing.

Embarrassingly, my knees shook a little as I straightened back up, but if anyone realized it, no one commented on it.

“Check the map Da Vinci made for us, if you can,” I told Mash. My voice came out a lot rougher and more breathless than I would have liked. “The Director said...that we needed to find a Ley Line Terminal. Da Vinci should have them...have them marked out.”

“Oh!” said Mash. “That’s right! The Director did say that!”

We all waited for several seconds as she did just that, and I could see the blurry play of light on the fog from the holographic display projecting up above her wrist, but not the map itself. Even if I’d



pulled up my own, I doubted I would have been able to see it, not with my eyes constantly watering and my vision so blurry.

It took more effort than I would have liked to admit to keep my breathing even and calm all the while. Even circulating energy through my circuits, I still felt the urge to cough, and it hadn't done anything at all for the disgusting tang in my mouth and the burning in my throat and chest. The dizziness hadn't gone anywhere either.

"...The closest one is a little further ahead, to the southwest, near the river," Mash said at length. "We're currently about halfway between there and Whitechapel, and if we had kept going straight westward, we would have missed it entirely."

A shiver went down my spine. Whitechapel, on a foggy afternoon, in London, 1888. Not only was it entirely possible we could have run into the real thing — less of a concern with how many Servants we had — but if there was a better catalyst for the summoning of Jack the Ripper, I couldn't think of it.

"Be...be careful," I managed to get out, choking down another cough. "It's...entirely possible we could...run into Jack the Ripper."

"What?" Jeanne Alter barked, laughing. "You're scared of an ordinary little serial killer?"

"No," Ritsuka answered before I could, coming to what must have been the same conclusion. "The Whitechapel murders took place in 1888, so... With a Holy Grail already in the mix, that means the original could accidentally summon his future self as an Assassin, couldn't he?"

"Damn," said Emiya. He sighed. "And no doubt, an Assassin Jack the Ripper would probably get some kind of bonus in foggy conditions, wouldn't he? This really is the perfect set of circumstances to summon a guy like him — which means we're almost guaranteed to run into him."

"That makes it all the more important we find that Ley Line Terminal as soon as possible, doesn't it?" said Arash. "I don't know about you, Emiya, but even a guy like me is having trouble seeing through this fog. We're out in the open and we're vulnerable. If we're ambushed, we might not even see it coming."

"Shut up," Jeanne Alter snapped.

Emiya sighed. "Jeanne —"

"Just shut up and fucking *listen!*" she hissed back at him.

The group fell into silence for a long moment. I held my breath, gritting my teeth as I forced down another coughing fit, and strained my ears — *there*.

*Clank*, was the sound of something metallic moving in the mist. *Clank-clank-clank*, was the creak of joints and the clatter of footfalls on the road. I tried to peer in the direction of the noise, but between the fog and my watery eyes, I had no hope of making anything out a foot in front of my face, let alone further down the street.

“What is it?” Rika whispered.

“I don’t know,” her brother murmured back. “It doesn’t...*sound* human, does it?”

“How can you tell?” she asked incredulously.

“I mean...”

“No, he’s right,” Arash whispered. “Whatever it is, it’s bipedal, but the way it echoes says that there’s nothing soft underneath to absorb the sound.”

I was, quite suddenly, hyper aware of the bag slung around my chest and the two ravens inside it. Da Vinci’s quality, of course, made it hard to distinguish them from the real thing, and when they were deployed in their normal forms, anyone who examined them wouldn’t find anything at all to suggest they weren’t regular birds.

“Puppets?” I muttered.

But not all puppets were up to that same standard. An average puppet user had puppets that might look right on the outside — *maybe*, because even that wasn’t a guarantee — but underneath, they were basically just mannequins with ball joints and different mechanisms inside that made them function. Hell, ceramics might have been cheaper to use, but there was never anything that said a puppet’s exoskeleton couldn’t be made of metal, was there?

Marie had even told me once of a magus who liked to design his puppets with clockwork gears. When I’d asked Da Vinci about it, she told me that wasn’t particularly unusual. There were plenty of magi who were still stuck far enough in the past that they had what she called “steampunk sensibilities.”

The clanking suddenly stopped, and for a few seconds, everything was quiet again — and then, just as suddenly, it started up again, faster, louder as it approached at speed. Somewhere in mist, there was an indistinct blob, but things were so bad I couldn’t even tell if it was anything other than my imagination.

Arash suddenly pulled out his bow, nocking an arrow and firing it with such speed that I couldn’t track the individual motions, and with a metallic *thunk*, it slammed home into that blur. Whatever-it-was collapsed — appropriately — like a puppet whose strings had been cut, and it slid to a stop in front of our group, clattering all the while as its lifeless limbs flailed about wildly.

“What the hell is that?” Jeanne Alter demanded loudly.

“It...*looks* kind of like a person,” Mash hedged, “but at the same time...”

“Not,” Ritsuka agreed.

I closed my own eyes, pushing down the thread that connected me to Arash so that I could borrow his, and looked down at the...thing.

Mash was right. It *did* look kind of like a person. But only kind of. It had a human shape, with two arms, two legs, a head, a torso, a pelvis. There was even a pair of swells on its torso to suggest the shape of a bust, to lend it a feminine profile. It stopped there, though, because it didn't have eyes, only a set of shallow indents on either side of a thin protrusion that was probably meant to represent a nose. The arms were also far too long, reaching down to its knees, and the piping on its torso gave it an exaggerated set of ribs.

A single arrow protruded from its bald head, cracks spider-webbing out from the point of impact, and what leaked out of the wound looked more like oil than blood.

It looked, in other words, the way I would have expected a fully articulated human puppet to look, one that was unfinished. No eyes, no skin, no finer details, only an exoskeleton and interior mechanisms. You couldn't have mistaken it for an actual person if you tried, not even in silhouette.

*Clank-clank-clank*

"There's more!" Emiya barked, and no sooner had he said it than did several more identical *things* leap out of the mist, sharpened fingers extended like claws. With dizzying speed that did nothing for my own spinning head, Arash whipped his bow around and unleashed a barrage of arrows into the group.

Two of them went down, collapsing much like the first had, with holes punched through what would have been a number of vital spots on a human being, and a third lost an arm as the red ball that formed its shoulder joint splintered and exploded, but it kept coming. Emiya finished it off with a pair of brutal cuts from his favored twin swords, separating the head from the shoulders and the torso from the pelvis. It clattered lifelessly to the ground.

But there were several more behind it, making for a total of at least ten, and a sneering Jeanne Alter swept her sword in an arc through the air, commanding them, "Burn!"

A gout of flame leapt from her blade — and with a slight sizzle the only warning, the mist in front of her ignited with a *BOOM* that nearly threw me and the twins off of our feet. Even Jeanne Alter was forced back a step as Emiya and Arash stumbled under the unexpected force of it.

"The hell?" Jeanne Alter said, her voice an octave higher than normal.

"Watch it!" Rika shrieked.

"It wasn't on purpose!" Jeanne Alter bit back. "The fuck just happened?"

With a clatter, the bits and pieces of the remaining puppet-things landed and tumbled down the road, scattering oil and shattered shards all over. In the brief pocket of free air the explosion had blown open, we could at least see enough to tell that she had gotten all of them with that.

"Probably a reaction to the magical energy in the fog," Emiya said, grimacing. He made a show of massaging what I assumed was one of his ears. "Those flames of yours are more like a curse than regular fire, so they're more volatile than normal, too. When you're not trying, they can fizzle out in a mist like this, but when you put some effort into it, well..."

She snarled, “Are you saying this is my fault?”

“I wasn’t before, but if you’re going to be so sensitive about it —”

“Guys!” Arash interrupted. He pointed at the puppets’ remains. “Look! You’re seeing this, too, aren’t you?”

“What?”

Emiya moved, bending down next to one of the “dead” puppets and inspecting it. From what I could actually see, he had to be reaching out to touch it, running his fingers over the parts. A moment later, he said, “They’re degrading. Corroding right before our eyes. I’d expect to see this sort of damage after *months* of exposure to the elements, not a few minutes.”

“So it wasn’t just me,” Arash said grimly.

Abruptly, Emiya stood back up. “We have to get out of this mist as soon as possible. Mash, how are you feeling?”

“Ah...I-I’m fine?” said Mash. “The smell hasn’t gotten any better, but I’m learning to deal with it.”

“Master?”

“I dunno about learning to deal with it, but I’m okay, too,” Rika answered. “Ugh. Food’s gonna taste weird for a while, isn’t it?”

“I’m okay, too,” said Ritsuka. “But I won’t complain about getting out of this fog as soon as we can.”

Emiya turned to me last. I couldn’t make out the expression on his face, but I assumed he was grimacing. “It looks like Taylor’s the only one being hit hard by this. We need to get her inside and contact the Doctor to see what sort of damage we’re looking at.”

A flash of annoyance curdled in my belly. “I’m —”

But the urge to cough won out again, and I couldn’t even finish my sentence before it interrupted me. No matter how hard I tried to hold it back, I failed, and I wound up hacking violently again, chest convulsing as my body tried to expel the acrid mist clinging to my throat and lungs.

I held my hand over my mouth, as much to muffle the sound as a matter of courtesy, and something warm and wet splashed over my palm again. Ugh. And it was thicker this time, so it wouldn’t be as easy to get rid of. It wasn’t like I could just wipe it off on my shirt. That was disgusting.

“Is that blood?” I heard someone whisper.

*What?*

With an effort of will, I pushed the next cough down and managed to hold it back long enough to pry my eyes open and look down at my hand — a deep, vivid red was splattered all over my palm,

with thin strands climbing in ropes up and down my fingers and flecks smeared into the joints. My mouth was so thoroughly coated in the misty grime that I couldn't even taste the coppery tang.

*Oh.*

Another fit seized me, seized me so violently and forcefully that I had to bend double as I coughed. My throat quickly went from ragged and sore to distressingly numb, and more wet heat hit my lips and palm.

But unlike before, the coughing didn't stop. Every scant breath I managed to suck down only made it worse, only made me cough more, and my already dizzy head started to spin as my lungs began to burn and my knees lost their strength. The tips of my fingers and toes tingled, numb.

*Maybe...*

My shoulder jarred and my other palm stung from the impact, and it was only that sudden jolt of pain that made me realize I'd fallen onto my hands and knees, still hacking.

“Master!”

The arm holding me up trembled. My blurry vision grew dark around the edges, slowly creeping inwards. Everything tunneled in on the cobblestone street beneath me.

*...I'm not okay.*

I didn't even feel it when I hit the ground.

“Senpai!”