

Chapter CXXXII: Knight of Treachery

We went to bed almost immediately after the twins, Fran, and Mash finished eating. Conveniently, Jekyll's building was three stories tall and otherwise unoccupied, so what might ordinarily have been a much tighter squeeze was instead more than enough room to accommodate all of us. Most of the Servants didn't need sleep, of course, but Mash insisted on being nearby the twins, Fran didn't want to be on her own, and Mordred — who had no Master and spent the most time active and fighting — needed time to rest and recover some of her energy, so somehow or another, we all wound up sprawled out across the parlor of the second floor apartment.

It was frankly a little ridiculous looking. Looking at all of us, you might have thought it was one, gigantic sleepover party. If you ignored the obvious incongruencies, like Fran's transformers and Mash's armor.

Somehow or another, it all worked out, and despite how prime a target we represented together, no Assassin snuck in during the night and no other Servant materialized to attack us. I was beginning to think that maybe there really wasn't a sensory aspect to the fog, that the enemy didn't have any idea we were all here and together. Either that, or they weren't confident enough in their success to try it.

Either of those options was good. Given that waves of automata, homunculi, and Helter Skelter didn't show up to even probe our defenses, I was more inclined to believe it was the former.

We were woken the next morning by Arash and a sour-faced Emiya to the smell of breakfast, and when we went down, it was to discover that Renée had cooked the entire thing — explaining perfectly Emiya's less than stellar mood.

What seemed to offend him more was that she was actually really good at it.

A spread of a typical English breakfast awaited us in the dining room, with bowls of porridge set out for us, garnished with strawberries and blueberries and seasoned with cinnamon, and strips of bacon, slabs of fish drizzled in a buttery sauce, and all of this finished off with a slice of toasted bread. There was more than enough for each of us, and there was honestly so much to it that I could almost feel the weight I was going to gain just from eating it once.

Damn if it wasn't good, though. Even Rika had to stop after the first few bites, stare down at her food with horror, and whisper — like the very idea of admitting it out loud was an offense to whatever god she might have believed in — “It's so good...!”

That more than anything else seemed to upset Emiya the most. I guess he'd gotten used to being our personal chef so much that the idea he could be replaced had never entered his mind.

Renée, on the other hand... If there was a way to describe the air about her, despite her perpetually stoic expression, it was like the cat that ate the canary. Smug was the word for it. Self-satisfied. And I guess she had every right to be.

Once we'd eaten, we wound up with about half an hour to digest our food and check in with Marie and Romani, and right around eight o'clock, we got the news from Arash: the fog was starting to clear out, the way it did every morning. If we were going to go out and investigate the case of the

mysterious magical book assaulting random citizens, then there was no better time than now, while we could beat the fog and didn't have to worry about it killing me.

We would only have about four hours before we had to rush me back here. If we couldn't make it in time, then we would just have to find the nearest (hopefully unoccupied) apartment to claim for the day and maybe send Mordred back here with whatever we managed to find while we were out. If things proved urgent enough, the twins and Mash could venture out without me and continue the investigation while I waited.

Fuck, planning around this fog was a pain in the ass. This Singularity was quickly making its way up the list for the one I hated most.

With our time so limited — or mine, at least — we had to get ready quickly. Fortunately, the twins had long since picked up the skill to dress and ready with speed, courtesy of our previous deployments and long practice. If the Ritsuka and Rika of Fuyuki could see how far they had come in just a few months, they might have fainted of disbelief.

We also made sure to mark the apartment on our maps, so that we wouldn't get lost — and so, in case the fog *did* pick back up before we could make it back on our own, everyone would still be able to find the place.

“Just to confirm,” I said to Jekyll as we did our last few checks. “We shouldn't expect to find the automata and homunculi involved in whatever's going on with this book. They don't go inside, they strictly stay out in the mist.”

“That is correct,” said Jekyll. “Our analysis and observation of their behavior thus far has shown that they avoid entering any of the residences in the city. Indeed, they seem utterly unconcerned with what goes on inside of any building, even this one where we ourselves now sit. They patrol the streets and do little else of note.”

“It's not in their programming,” Mordred said with a grimace, like it left a bad taste in her mouth. “They just do what their creator made them for and that's it. Like puppets on strings.”

She seemed to despise the very idea.

“An...apt comparison, Sir Mordred,” said Caster.

“It means they don't go inside and hurt anyone, though,” said Ritsuka. “So there is that, at least. It makes things a little easier if the only ones we have to worry about protecting are ourselves.”

Indeed. The fewer bystanders we had to be concerned about, the easier it would be to investigate — both the Singularity and these incidents with the magic book. If we were particularly fortunate, none of the book's victims would have any major problems either and the whole thing could be taken care of quickly and easily. That way, we could have enough time to look into what was going on with the Singularity itself.

“There is, of course, no way for us to currently determine if or in what way this magical tome is connected to Project Demonic Fog,” said Jekyll. “It may be that it is entirely unrelated, a third party in this situation with motives, methods, and end goals that exist to us equally as enigmatic as the

perpetrators behind the fog itself. If it is at all possible to ascertain that with any degree of certitude, it would be most helpful.”

“Tch,” Mordred scoffed. “What, like there’s gonna be someone else hanging around the place causing a mess? Nah, mark my words. This has something to do with that Assassin that’s popping up all over the place.”

Entirely possible. We’d find out for ourselves once we got down to things and had a chance to investigate.

“But this book hasn’t been killing anyone, has it?” Ritsuka wondered aloud. “Right, Doctor Jekyll?”

“Thus far, the victims have only been rendered unconscious,” Jekyll answered. “Although they have yet to recover, there have not been any signs that any damage of the more permanent variety has been inflicted, and so I can only say that you are correct, Ritsuka, none of the victims have yet died.”

“Small mercies,” said Arash. “Things are bad enough right now as it is, and they’re only going to get worse. The fewer bodies at the end of this all, the better.”

“That don’t mean nothing,” Mordred said stubbornly. “That Assassin, they’d do something just like this to lure us in for an ambush.”

If the magical book was related in any way to that Assassin and they were both part of the conspiracy behind this place...yes, that was also entirely possible. Especially if one of the conspirators really was a famous author, then the book might be his Noble Phantasm. But —

“If it’s a trap, then we’ll spring it,” I said. Hopefully, without the fog to make things harder, with enough forewarning we wouldn’t get caught with our pants down. “We’ll find out for sure either way once we get there and start looking around. Is there anything else we need to know, Doctor Jekyll?”

He shook his head. “At the moment, nothing of consequence. You know all that I have to tell you, and I can arm you with nothing more at this time than my hope for your safe return.”

“Heh.” Mordred grinned. “Like we’ll need it!”

“Considering the amount of firepower we’ll be walking around with,” Emiya said, leaving that thought to hang meaningfully.

“That book won’t know what hit it!” Rika said confidently.

“Not unless it’s a manga,” Ritsuka added slyly, and his sister did the mature thing and stuck her tongue out at him.

When we were all suited up and ready to go — including Mordred, who donned a suit of armor that actually did a pretty good job of disguising the fact she was a woman — our group stepped outside and into the dim morning light. The sky above was cloudy and overcast, and the sun struggled to pierce through the thick cloud cover. The street looked as though a film had been cast over the entire city, leaving the entire place cool and dark as though the sun hadn’t even risen yet.

That cloud cover was probably the remnants of the fog, bled off from when it let up like this in the mornings. Or maybe it was just London's infamous gloom. I didn't really care about the difference when the result was the same.

It was better than having the entire street covered in mist, at least. I could see further out than three feet in front of my face, for one thing, and the streetlamps actually accomplished their intended purpose, for another. For how long was the question.

Four hours, give or take. That was how much time we had, and if we wanted to keep everyone together as much as possible, that was when we had to be back here at Jekyll's apartment.

"Took your sweet-ass time," Jeanne Alter drawled by way of greeting. "We getting out of here or what?"

"While the roads are clear, yes," I said. "We'll need you to stay here, though."

She whipped her head around to look at me so fast I thought I heard her neck crack. "What? The fuck I am!"

I'd expected a reaction like that.

"We need a line of communication with Jekyll and Abraham in case we can't beat the fog back here," I explained my reasoning. "And someone to do the fighting if they get attacked while we're away."

"So?" she said. She gestured at Arash and Emiya. "Just leave one of those two asswipes here!"

The two of them traded a look. Emiya arched an eyebrow at Arash, who shrugged.

"You're the only one we all have a contract with, Jeanne Alter," said Ritsuka, getting to it before I could. Like he'd predicted her response so well that he already had it all prepared. "You're the only one we can all contact, if we need to. It has to be you."

"Tch." Jeanne Alter's lip curled.

"It'll be different in the afternoons," I told her. "Then, Emiya will be staying behind and you'll be going out with everyone."

"Hold on," said Emiya, "when was this decided?"

My brow furrowed. Shouldn't the reasoning have been obvious? All of the most immediate problems we'd be facing with logistics had been essentially spelled out to us last night, in big, bold lettering.

"Oh," said Mash, "because Miss Taylor can't go outside in the fog, and with it interrupting communications, the only way for us to stay in contact is to use Emiya and Arash as go-betweens."

"Exactly."

Emiya sighed. “Well. I guess I can’t argue with that logic. Not unless my Master gives me a countermanding order.”

He slid a glance at Rika, who smiled back at him.

“I expect a hot meal ready and waiting for me every night when I come home,” she said sweetly.

Emiya’s shoulders sagged, defeated, and he shrugged, shaking his head, as though to say, ‘what can you do?’

“See?” Ritsuka said to Jeanne Alter. “It’s just for the mornings. And I’m sure there’ll be plenty of things for you to set on fire in the afternoons.”

“Tch.” Jeanne Alter scoffed again, rolling her eyes. “Don’t try to sweet talk me, because it won’t work. I’ll stay here and guard this shitty apartment, but only because there probably won’t be anything interesting going on anyway. Burning a stupid magical book would just be boring. It probably won’t even scream.”

She jerked her thumb at the door, where Fran lingered, looking out at us with a furrowed brow.

“What about her? I hope you’re not expecting me to babysit.”

“Uh,” Fran grunted, low and hesitant, now that attention had been brought to her presence. “Uh-uh...uhn...”

“What, you’re lonely?” said Mordred. “Just sit tight and wait. We’ll be right back.”

Fran grimaced.

“She’s worried,” I translated. I didn’t add the more personal part — that she worried we might not come back, that something bad might happen to the only people who had yet shown her kindness — out of courtesy.

“Uhn...”

“We’re coming right back after we investigate this magical book thing,” Ritsuka reassured her. “And with Arash, Emiya, Mash, and Mordred all here, there’s nothing that can hurt us, so we’ll all be back before you know it.”

“Damn straight!” Mordred agreed.

Fran didn’t seem entirely convinced, but when we turned to leave, she made no move to stop us or join us, she just stayed in the doorway, watching us go. Like she was afraid to let us leave her sight, or we’d vanish into smoke.

Fortunately for everyone involved, nothing of the sort happened. The fog didn’t suddenly surge back into existence, which put more weight on the idea that the makers couldn’t sense anything through it, and once we’d safely made it a whole block away from the apartment, I let Huginn out of my bag so he could take to the air and keep an eye out for any incoming fog. In the background, I

started to gather a meager swarm, as large of one as I dared, with how quickly the situation could turn against us.

Mordred, of course, led the way, since she knew best where we needed to go. She took point out in front and we all fell into step behind her.

“I feel kind of bad leaving Fran behind like that,” Mash confessed once we were out of earshot.

“I know what you mean,” Ritsuka said. “Doctor Jekyll, Abraham, Renée, and Jeanne Alter are all there, but none of them can understand her, and none of them are...well...”

“Particularly personable?” Arash offered.

Ritsuka shrugged, grimacing.

“Homunculi aren’t well-known for their people skills,” Emiya drawled.

“You’re just jealous because she’s actually a pretty good cook,” said Rika. “Don’t worry, you’re still my house-husband. Your place in my heart is secure.”

He shook his head. “Of course.”

“Even *if* she managed some kind of black magic and made *porridge* taste good!”

A complicated expression crossed Emiya’s face, like he wasn’t quite sure what he should say to that or how seriously he should take her. It wouldn’t surprise me to find porridge on his breakfast menu at some point in the future in some kind of attempt to prove he could do the same thing just as well as Renée could.

“We should only be gone for a few hours,” I said, and didn’t add the caveat, *as long as we can beat the fog back to the apartment*. “She’ll be fine.”

“Still,” Mash mumbled.

“Bah! She’s a big girl, stop your worrying!” said Mordred. “Focus on the task ahead! We’ve gotta find a goddamned magical book! What kind of nonsense is that? Ain’t nothing I’ve ever seen before, I’ll tell you that!”

Mash’s brow furrowed. “Come to think of it, there were a lot of monsters in the Arthurian romances, weren’t there? Did you ever fight any of them, Sir Mordred?”

Mordred’s face broke out into a grin. “Loads! Aw, man, you don’t have any idea, do you, Shieldy? Even with that guy riding sidesaddle, huh? The Knights of the Round Table fought all sorts of nasty critters hanging about in those days! Dragons and giants, too!”

“And lions and tigers and bears?” Rika asked. The reference, of course, flew right over Mordred’s head, and she completely ignored Ritsuka’s quiet groan.

“All sorts!” Mordred confirmed, still grinning. “Thick woods, steep mountains, deep caves — places like that, where mankind never goes? Prime place for monsters and phantasmals to sit their asses down and claw out a space. And on occasion, they’ll come down to some village or town or something and make a mess.”

“Leaving you to handle mopping them up,” Emiya concluded.

“Not like we can leave it to regular townsfolk or simple guardsman, right?” Mordred agreed. “Ordinary humans are just food to stuff like that. If a griffon or a dragon is terrorizing the countryside, who else are you gonna send but one of the Knights of the Round Table? Man, we fought all sorts of crazy shit like that!” Her grin broadened. “You ever meet that lunkhead, Gawain, make sure to ask him about the Green Knight. The look on his face is priceless!”

“Green Knight?” asked Rika. “What, did he paint himself green or something? Walk around with branches in his hair?”

Mash grimaced. “Yes, Senpai,” she said reluctantly, “but also...not really...”

“Remind me later and I’ll tell you the story,” I said to Rika. She gave me a cheeky salute.

“Roger, roger!”

And now another Prequels meme. As long as she didn’t start complaining about how coarse and rough sand was, I could deal with it.

God, she really was rubbing off on me, wasn’t she?

“Like I said,” Mordred said. “All sorts of crazy shit lives out in the deep woods and forests, and we killed a whole bunch of ‘em, back in the day. Oh.” Her grin disappeared and her brow furrowed. “And them. Those crazy bastards. The Picts.”

“The Picts?” Ritsuka echoed.

“Yeah,” Mordred said grimly.

“I’ve read that we really don’t know much about them, even in our time,” said Mash. “Just about the only thing we’re sure of is that they were a tribe in Scotland, once.”

A complicated look crossed Mordred’s face. “They weren’t...really a...*tribe* or anything like that, but... How should I put this...” She worked her jaw back and forth. “To be a tribe, you kinda hafta be *human*, first, you know? And they were...more like...”

“Faeries?” I offered. Mordred shook her head.

“Faeries still make sense,” she admitted grudgingly. “They’re twisty as fuck and all sorts of bad news, but you still kinda know what you’re working with if you know anything about them. The Picts were like...something out of a crazy story. Your era has those movie things, right? With flying disks and little green men and stuff like that?”

All of us turned to her incredulously, because I wasn't the only one who thought the implication was ridiculous.

"You're saying the Picts were aliens?" Emiya asked, unable to keep the disbelief out of his voice.

Mordred's face cleared and she nodded. "Yeah! Aliens! That's a good way to describe them!"

"What, really?" said Rika. "Like, honest-to-goodness aliens? *Take me to your leader, Earthlings*, and all?"

Mordred snorted. "They weren't nowhere near that nice and polite, but yeah. Like they really didn't just fucking *belong*."

I...wasn't sure how to take that. Ritsuka and Mash didn't look like they were any better off, and Rika still looked faintly surprised, like she was still processing it and hadn't quite come to grips with it yet. For once, I didn't blame her. I'd been introduced to a lot of stuff that had changed how I saw the world since I woke up in Chaldea, but the idea that aliens — or something like them, at least — had been on Earth 1500 years before Scion showed up was still unusual.

Fortunately for me, a convenient distraction decided at that moment to stomp its way through the outer edges of my swarm.

"Heads up," I said sharply as I turned towards the group lumbering our direction. "More of those automata are on the way."

Everyone refocused, the Picts forgotten for the moment. Mash's shield materialized immediately. "Master! Orders?"

"How close?" Ritsuka asked me.

"Far enough away that we could go around them, if we wanted to."

Although we didn't really know whether they had some kind of sensors built into them either, did we? It wouldn't surprise me if they did, as a method of navigating the fog, especially since they didn't seem to have traditional sensory organs as it was anyway.

"No," Ritsuka said immediately. "This is the only time anyone has to go outside and find food, right? We can't let those things hurt them just because it would be easier for us."

Not to mention it would take us longer to take a detour around them than it would to just bowl through them anyway. It wound up being better for everyone if we just kept going and took them out on our way to Soho.

"Then we'll take them out," I agreed.

We kept going, continuing the same direction and taking the same route we had been before, and as the group of automata came further into my range and touched denser regions of my anemic swarm, I sent Huginn further out to get a more human look at the things. As it turned out, it wasn't just automata in the group, because interspersed among them were also masses of twisting flesh shaped into vaguely humanoid silhouettes, with large, muscular arms, hulking torsos, and no neck to speak

of. They had three, beady little protrusions on what was probably supposed to be the head that might have been eyes, if I was being particularly generous.

And at the back, lumbering after the rest with hissing hydraulics, was what I could only describe as a robot. Bulky, clunky, nowhere near as elegant as most of Dragon's works, but undeniably mechanical. Each of them carried what looked like a large meat cleaver.

Fuck. If the twisted meaty things were the grotesque homunculi, then those were the things everyone was calling Helter Skelter, weren't they? Ugh, I wished we had a better name for them.

"They have more of those robots and homunculi with them, too," I warned everyone.

"Any sign of that Assassin?" Emiya asked.

I spread out my swarm, feeling out the area as best I could, and up above, Huginn cast his gaze about, looking down with a literal bird's eye view, but no. There were no other mysterious figures skulking about in the area, either following the patrol group we were about to run into or trailing us to wait for a moment of ambush.

"None."

"Tch." Mordred scoffed. "Watch that bastard show up halfway through the fight outta fucking nowhere. Slippery sonuvabitch."

"Someone should keep an eye out, just in case," Ritsuka suggested.

"Arash?"

Arash nodded. "I'll handle it."

Emiya chuckled lowly. "I guess it *does* make more sense for me to handle the electronic maintenance, so to speak."

"Because you're a house-husband?" asked Rika. Emiya's cheek twitched.

"Something like that," he answered vaguely.

It wasn't much longer before we could *hear* the incoming group, and whatever senses or sensors they had, they seemed to detect us, too, because they sped up almost as soon as the first clunks reached our ears and came right towards us. The slap of meaty feet, the clink of fine porcelain, and the clang of bulky metal clattered across the street, and moments later, they came around a curve in the road and into sight.

There were twelve, total. Four of each, like their group had been specifically designed just for that number.

"There they are!" said Ritsuka.

"Go!" I barked.

“You don’t fucking —” Mordred launched herself forwards in a flash of red lightning — “give me orders!”

Her sword sliced clean through the first automata, cleaving it from shoulder to hip, and it fell to the ground in two pieces, inert.

The others followed in her wake. Mash set herself in front of us Masters, shield held out defensively, and Emiya leapt towards the group himself, his familiar twin blades forming in his hands. He came down on one of the homunculi, slicing neatly through its flesh with a pair of ugly cuts, but all that seemed to do was make it angry, because it swayed back from the blow and lashed out with a pair of hands that were more spirals of merged tendrils than actual fingers.

But the fact I had such an easy time following them meant that they weren’t anywhere near as fast or as strong as a Servant, and Emiya dodged out of the way, severing one of the arms at what would have been the elbow and then diving in for another powerful cut at the torso. Nearby, Mordred darted in and dismantled another of the automata. Even if it saw her coming, it was too slow to get out of the way, and it went down just as easily as the first.

Ironically, it was some of the first enemies in our way since Fuyuki that I would actually have been able to meaningfully damage, and there wasn’t much room for me to actually try. The homunculi were hardier than the automata, but once Emiya figured out what worked on the first one, it was much faster and easier for him to take down the next.

Mordred? Mordred had it even easier. I guess it only made sense, considering her stats, but she ripped through everything in her way with ease.

Not much room wasn’t the same as no room, though. I wasn’t entirely sure how much my Gandr would do against something that wasn’t biological, but it wasn’t the only thing in my arsenal, so while Mordred and Emiya tore through the automata and homunculi like paper, I helped along the edges, using my prosthetic’s phantom limb to yank them into more advantageous positions. If either of them noticed that their targets were suddenly off balance and unable to even think of dodging or pulled further into the path of their swords, they gave no indication.

For how little it was, it felt good. Meaningful. Next time, I would have to test it and see if the homunculi were as vulnerable to my bugs as people were, but without any obvious orifices to shove a swarm into, probably not.

The last to go down were the robots. The Helter Skelter. They were slower than either the homunculi or the automata, but they made up for it by being hardier. Their outer plating was less like an exoskeleton holding all of their internals together and more like armor, and while it dented and crumpled under Mordred’s strength, Emiya had much less success. While she whaled away at one with her sword and Emiya tried to whittle away at another with his pair, I secreted a platoon of insects into the third and fourth, looking for vulnerabilities.

There weren’t any. None that I could damage that easily, at any rate, because the wiring and the mechanisms were all metal, and none of my bugs had the jaw strength to bite through something like that on their own. If I got enough in there, I could gum up the joints...but with how conservative I had to be about my swarm, it might be a bit of a waste trying to slow down something that was already fairly slow and easy to hit.

Instead, I had Huginn sweep low, open his beak, and fire off a sizzling round from his mana cannon. I got a front row seat — two of them, in fact, because my bugs let me judge the impact — to exactly how effective it was.

‘Not very,’ was the answer. The metal heated up significantly where it hit, but it would take something like two dozen shots for the temperature to reach high enough to start warping the material. The plating was simply too thick.

Unfortunately, my shot also got its attention, and it broke off from lumbering towards Emiya — who was still trying to find a good weak spot on his — and Mordred — who had finished off the first one and was working through her second — to head towards us.

“I think you got its attention, Senpai!” Rika said.

“Mash!” said Ritsuka.

“Right!”

Mash leapt towards it, and they met in the middle with a clang as she brought the full weight of her shield down upon its body. It was only half as effective as one of Mordred’s blows, however, and she succeeded in leaving only a large dent behind in its armor. It struck out at her in retaliation, swinging around a large cleaver that looked half its size, and Mash weathered the blow with the front of her shield.

For however sturdy they were, at least the Helter Skelter didn’t seem anywhere near as physically strong, even with as much weight as they were carrying around. Mash didn’t even flinch.

Huginn swooped back in and fired off another shot, distracting it, and it turned its head towards him long enough for Mash to take advantage of its inattention and land another blow with her shield. She targeted one of the joints, attempting to wedge the edge of her shield in between the head and the torso, probably trying to separate them. Even if the central processor was in the torso instead of the head, the head was where the cameras serving as its eyes were set. It was a good strategy.

Unfortunately, the gaps in the Helter Skelter’s body were relatively tiny. Whoever had built them had designed them with overlapping plates, and while that made their movements stiff and stilted, it gave them enough protection that targeting the weak spots was hard for something that wasn’t thin and sharp, like a blade.

Fortunately, I happened to have the solution to that problem.

I took off from the group, racing towards where Mash and the Helter Skelter were, and my free hand reached down to grasp the hilt of my Last Resort as I pulled it from its sheath.

“Senpai!” Rika cried after me. “Not again!”

“Mash!” Ritsuka called. “Protect her!”

“Yes, Master!”

Mash backed away from attacking and took a more defensive posture, and the Helter Skelter, primitive as it was, took that as a cue to go on the attack. It didn't seem to even notice me as it lifted its enormous arm again and took another swing at Mash, who blocked it again with her shield effortlessly.

Even if she hadn't had its attention, I had enough bugs inside of its body to know exactly how it was moving and how it was going to move. I could feel the mechanisms, the hydraulics compressing and decompressing, the gears grinding and churning. If my bugs had let me dodge around other capes just by having them sit on top of my enemy's limbs, then this was the equivalent of having bugs *inside* their muscles.

The Helter Skelter noticed me at the last second. It broke off attacking Mash to turn to me, but it was child's play to duck and weave around its clumsy attempt at a chop, and I slid behind it, flipped my grip on my knife, and plunged the tip in the small space between the head and chest. On a human, it would have been straight through the jugular vein. A flick of a switch turned on the nanothorns, and with a low hiss, they ate through the metal and the mechanisms like they were butter.

The Helter Skelter flailed. It swung its arm and cleaver around in an attempt to knock me off, but I saw it coming a mile away and jerked my knife free to avoid it, carving a smooth, nasty gash through it and severing several of the mechanisms controlling that same arm simultaneously. The flailing arm locked up, and the shoulder loosened, leaving it to fall limply and uselessly towards the ground. It swayed like a giant pendulum.

"Now, Mash!" I said as I backed away.

Mash didn't miss her cue, and with a rising shout, she slammed the edge of her shield into the gash I'd created. The Helter Skelter teetered over and then fell backwards onto the stone street with a thunderous thud. Mash followed it, putting all her weight and strength behind her shield until the groaning metal gave way and its head popped off and rolled away.

The body still moved. The remaining arm waved about impotently, smacking the ground and doing nothing except scuffing the stonework. The legs wagged about, like it was trying and failing to climb back to its feet.

Another pass of my Last Resort severed the mechanisms controlling the other shoulder, and that fell impotently onto the road, too, leaving me free and clear to kneel down, shove my knife deep into the internals, and keep going until I hit the vital processor at the center of its chest. The instant the nanothorns chewed threw that, the whole thing locked up and stopped moving.

Whoever had made these things wasn't as elegant as Dragon and hadn't packed anywhere near as much hardware into them. They weren't even on the same level as her lowest tech suits. But I could at least give them credit for having figured out that it was better to place the central control unit for a robot in its chest instead of its head. The head was just too obvious a target.

Humans were like that. We tended to think of things that looked anything like us as being like us. We saw faces in random rock formations and patterns in the snow. Putting the central control of a robot in its head was the thing that made the most sense to people, so putting it in the chest, which could be better protected and wasn't as obvious, was the smarter choice.

With the Helter Skelter defeated and disabled, I stood and stepped back, using the bugs still inside it to keep searching through the internals. Looking for other weak points. This thing had to run on some kind of engine or battery or something, so if that was easier to target than its “brain,” it would be easier to take down in the future.

‘Easier.’ As though that hadn’t been easy enough as it was. The automata were a bit too fast and nimble to try that on, and the homunculi were a bit too dangerous until I could figure out how to distract them with my bugs, but the Helter Skelter? I could probably have taken it out on my own. Mash just removed any difficulty there had been to it.

Any sign of the Assassin? I asked Arash.

None, he answered. *If they’re hanging around somewhere, they’re doing too good a job staying hidden. It doesn’t look like they’re going to ambush us.*

Or maybe they were just cautious of taking on four Servants at once, especially without a clear shot at any of the Masters. Given that I couldn’t find anyone out of the ordinary with my swarm, however? I was willing to bet they weren’t even here.

At that moment, the final Helter Skelter went down with a weighty thud, shaking the stonework beneath my feet, and Mash reported, “E-enemy combatants defeated, Master!”

“Good job, Mash!” Ritsuka called over to her.

She smiled. “Thank you, Senpai!”

“Good job?” Mordred echoed. She whirled about, snarling. “You fucking call *that* a good job?”

Mash blinked, bewildered. “I-I’m sorry?”

Mordred swung her sword around, pointing the tip at Mash, and I stepped back cautiously, watching the scene unfold as my mind raced through where this could be going.

There’d been talk during my lessons about how Servants couldn’t truly escape the destiny of the Heroic Spirits that they were formed from, but... Did that mean that Mordred would be so trapped by her own legend that she couldn’t help turning on her allies?

“That,” said Mordred, voice barely more than a growl, “*that* just makes it worse! You two, you’re similar enough that it pisses me the fuck off, but even with that bastard inside of you, *this* is the best you’ve got?”

Ritsuka, opposite to me, came closer, as though to bolster Mash with his presence. Rika wasn’t far behind him, and she was watching the whole thing like I was, eyes wide and smile completely gone. Behind Mordred, Emiya was tensed up, too, fingers curled tight around his pair of swords.

“Is something wrong?” Ritsuka asked carefully.

“Yeah,” said Mordred. “That was pathetic. Pathetic! Even with just that shield, that bastard would’ve taken those things out like it was nothing, and Mash couldn’t even handle *one* on her own! You telling me you don’t see anything wrong with that?”

“I’m sorry,” Mash said miserably. “The Servant who entrusted these powers to me, he didn’t teach me anything about how to use them or even tell me his true name.”

Mordred waved that off with a scoff. “Of course he didn’t! Handing you the answers just stunts your growth! But you said you’ve already gone through four of these Singularities, right? You should be stronger than this by now!”

“Hey, she’s fought plenty of super strong stuff!” Rika said indignantly. “Like giant tentacle monsters! Especially the giant tentacle monsters! She’s plenty strong!”

“Plenty strong ain’t gonna cut it!” said Mordred. “You don’t even know how to properly use that Noble Phantasm yet, do you? You can’t just react to shit that comes your way, you have to be one step ahead of both yourself and your enemy at all times!”

A flash of red lightning. A blur of motion and sound as the street cracked and splintered. Mordred vanished from her spot, suddenly in front of Mash, sword swinging, and Mash only barely reacted in time to parry the blow and send that sword off course.

Paradoxically, Mordred grinned. “Nice! That’s a little more like it, Shieldy!”

“What are you doing?” Ritsuka demanded. “Mordred!”

“Stay right there, Ritsuka!” barked Mordred. “You, too, all of the rest of you! This is between me and Mash, so don’t you dare interfere!”

My eyes narrowed. *Arash?*

Yeab? he replied.

You said it’s something she has to figure out on her own, right? I asked him.

...Yeab, he answered, almost reluctantly. *The way she said it was a little blunt, but Mordred’s point isn’t wrong. Mash won’t reach her full potential if the answers are just handed to her.*

But it looked like I wasn’t the only one who was impatient about the issue. It was just that the person forcing the issue happened to be someone who knew Galahad better than I did, and was therefore more qualified to handle it than me.

More qualified. Mordred, the knight who betrayed King Arthur and Camelot and set it all on the path to destruction. As weird as it sounded, it was the truth.

“Sir Mordred...” Mash muttered, brow furrowed and mouth set in a grim line.

Keep a close eye on things, I decided. *We’ll only intervene if it looks like she’s in real danger.*

Got it, Arash confirmed.

Fuck, if it didn't make me feel like a complete bitch, though.

"Come on," said Mordred. "Put up that shield, Mash. I'm gonna batter it to pieces until you learn exactly how you should be using it!"

She grinned. A savage thing of hunger and teeth, like a lion about to pounce on a gazelle and rip it apart.

"By the time I'm done with you, even that bastard will have to look at you and nod his goddamn head in approval!"