

Chapter LXXXII: Towards the Ocean Blue

Thankfully, I slept well and didn't dream, and when I woke up the morning of our Rayshift into the Okeanos Singularity, I wasn't exactly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, but my mind was clear and focused and my body was awake and energized. I was ready to begin the next stage of our mission.

It felt a little strange to skip out on my usual routine right after getting back into it, but I forewent most of my morning workout — taking only enough time and energy to get in a quick jog on the treadmill — and started my last minute preparations instead. Huginn and Muninn went into my bag, my communicator went on my wrist, and then I squeezed into the brand new mystic code Da Vinci was so proud of.

It felt familiar, in a way. It wasn't quite the same as my old costume — it was a snugger fit, for one — but the way it clung to me felt almost nostalgic. Like putting on an old pair of jeans I thought I'd grown out of.

It *looked* a little ridiculous, though. More like fetish wear than a uniform for an organization of professionals safeguarding the proper course of human history. Skintight, with swooping symmetrical stripes in black, white, and orange that contoured around my torso and my limbs. If it had been black leather or latex, it wouldn't have looked out of place in a dominatrix club.

Being fair, I suppose, my old costume would have looked just as strange anywhere else aside from Earth Bet. For all that we'd gotten used to the trappings of superheroes and supervillains, in a world without capes, the only place it belonged was a Halloween party.

Or a Caster simulation.

Fortunately, I also read the manual, so after a little bit of trial and error, I managed to figure out how to connect the standard uniform module and activate it.

Watching the fabric twist and shift around my body into the jacket and pants I'd spent the last two years wearing was surreal. Feeling the threads unravel into mist, ghosting along my skin like a million tiny feet crawling all over me...

The only thing that made it feel strange was the fact that this wasn't me secreting bugs into every nook and cranny that would fit them. The sensation wasn't anything I hadn't felt before, but the lack of that absolute sense of what was doing it threw me off.

Rika was going to hate it.

I spent an extra minute in front of my mirror when it was done, checking to make sure everything was as it should be and that nothing looked strange or out of place, but as expected of Da Vinci's work, there weren't any flaws or mistakes. If I didn't know any better, if it hadn't happened right in front of my eyes, I wouldn't have even realized there was a difference.

It really was amazing just how many disciplines she had mastered, and how easily she could make use of each one. "The Universal Man," indeed.

And just like she said, the module she'd supplied had the trio of spells I'd grown used to using. I had to wonder what spells the other modules would have preloaded, because I couldn't imagine Da Vinci would put the same things on all of them. Even if only as a matter of pride, she wouldn't be that 'unimaginative.'

Showered, dressed, and as prepared as I was ever going to be, I made my way down to the cafeteria to eat breakfast, my footsteps echoing through the empty hallways. I met no one on my way, not even that little gremlin playing at team mascot.

Naturally, of course, that was because he and the rest of the "away team" were already in the cafeteria, huddled around the twins and Mash, who were eating breakfast. Arash looked up and met my eyes as I entered, then flashed a smile and raised his hand in greeting before he turned back towards the twins.

Emiya greeted me with a tray and a plate of food, already ready for me the instant I walked in the door. This time, his apron featured a set of Greek letters whose intended message escaped me.

"Something relatively light, today," he told me. "Should make the Rayshift a bit easier on you, this time."

"Thanks," I replied automatically. I hadn't really given any thought to how uncomfortable the last few Rayshifts had been, how disorienting they were, and what that would probably mean for this one. Everything else had taken up more of my attention.

"Don't mention it."

"Getting a last meal in before we head out?"

He smirked. "Making sure my 'assistant' has all the recipes in order so everyone else won't miss me so much. And getting in one more meal made in a proper kitchen before we go, yeah."

"Don't let it make you late," I warned him.

He waved it off. "Yeah, I figured that one out on my own, thanks. Now go enjoy it while you still have time."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes, long enough to turn away from him at least, and took my tray over to the table where the twins were sitting, picking at their food. Arash, thoughtfully, had left a space open for me to sit at, and I took it without hesitating.

"Good morning," he greeted me with a smile.

"Morning."

"Good morning, Miss Taylor," Mash greeted me politely. The little gremlin on her shoulder looked at me with his beady eyes and lifted his snout snobbishly, like I wasn't good enough to warrant a verbal response of any kind.

"Morning, Mash."

“Morning,” Rika muttered miserably at the same time as her brother gave me a subdued, “Morning, Senpai.”

“Something wrong?” I asked as I started cutting up my food.

“I feel so *exposed*,” Rika admitted, glancing about as though she expected everyone to be staring at her. She was hunched in on herself, presenting the smallest target possible, as though she could escape notice entirely if she just made herself look small enough.

No one was staring, of course, out of the five or six other people in the room, but I understood the feeling. Winslow had been like that, too, and even though it felt like several lifetimes ago, I could still remember it. How much it sucked and how it made you hyperaware of every one of your flaws, real or imagined.

“It’s a bit much,” Ritsuka agreed. He wasn’t doing as bad as his sister, but he still looked uncomfortable.

“It’s really not that bad, Master!” Bradamante tried to reassure them. “Really, it’s very flattering!”

“That’s part of the problem,” Rika mumbled. She swirled her food around her plate with her fork moodily.

I glanced down at the mystic code she was wearing, a mirror image of the one I’d squeezed into less than an hour ago. Swooping lines of black, white, and orange in large blocks of color, skintight and clinging. Rika’s happened to flatter her figure more, mostly because she had more of a figure to flatter.

Even if I’d long since come to terms with my own appearance, Rika was more full-figured than me. Larger bust, wider hips. It meant there was more there for people to notice.

Of course, it wasn’t as thin as that made it seem. It was skintight, yes, but it had a consistency closer to spandex, so the fabric was thick enough and padded enough that it wouldn’t be, ah, *riding up* anywhere uncomfortable, or showing off any intimate details.

In that sense, her brother actually had more to worry about than she did. He’d probably be fine if he didn’t let his eyes wander too much.

“Is it?” asked Mash. “I always found it very comfortable, and Miss Taylor never complained.”

Rika favored her with a gimlet eye. “Considering what you wear when you’re in Servant mode, I don’t think you have room to talk, Cinnamon Roll.”

Mash blinked. “Cinnamon roll?”

Ritsuka sighed. “She’s finally decided on a nickname for you.”

“Seems kinda long,” said Arash.

“As opposed to Super Action Mom?” Ritsuka pointed out.

Arash laughed. “Maybe not. It rolls off the tongue easier, though.”

“Keep that up and you’ll never get one,” Rika muttered.

Arash raised his hands in surrender.

I decided to take pity on her then, and a breath hissed out of my nostrils as I held out my hand. “Give me your arm.”

Rika looked at me, confused, brow furrowing.

“It came with a module for the spells,” I explained patiently, “one that lets you change the appearance to one of the preset designs. It’s why I’m dressed like this instead of the way you are. Give me the arm you attached the module on.”

Understanding rippled across her face, and almost eagerly, she thrust out her left arm into my hand. I set my fork down, found the module, and started adjusting the settings the way I had my own not that long ago.

After a few seconds of fiddling with it, the fabric of her suit unraveled into strips of dense mist, and Rika squeaked, face turning red, as she ripped her arm out of my grasp and tried to cover herself up, one arm slung over her chest and the other hand pressed down towards her lap. Next to her, Ritsuka’s eyes had gone very wide.

“Senpai!” Rika squealed.

I pressed my lips together to keep from saying anything. It wasn’t like the mist of nanomachines was thin enough to see anything aside from vague splotches of fleshy color. Honestly, it was less revealing than a swimsuit, and the way they glittered as they changed patterns distracted the eye away from anything you *could* see. I’d seen more skin on the cover of my dad’s Sports Illustrated, and more of hers in Nero’s bath.

It was over almost as quickly as it began, and instead of the skintight suit of the Combat Uniform, Rika was now dressed in the standard issue Chaldea uniform, female model: white jacket, pleated black skirt, and leggings, complete with white boots. Her communicator was the only thing left unchanged, sitting like a bracelet on her wrist.

“There,” I said as I picked my fork up and dug back into my breakfast. “Problem solved.”

“Problem *not* solved! Problem very much not solved!” Rika protested, face still very red. “Senpai, I didn’t sign up to be a stripper!”

“I-I didn’t see anything,” her brother said, looking anywhere but at her.

“M-me neither, Senpai,” Mash agreed. “I-it was...um, actually...very pretty to watch.”

“Like a magical girl transformation sequence,” added Ritsuka.

Rika blinked. “What?”

“A...magical girl transformation sequence?” asked Bradamante. She looked to me like I had any better idea what they were talking about than she did. All I could do was shake my head.

“Really? Huh.” Rika looked down at herself. “Does that make me Sailor Moon?”

Ritsuka’s face twisted into a complicated expression. Mash just tilted her head to the side and asked, “Sailor Moon?”

Rika turned a pitying look on her. “Oh, you poor, deprived child.”

Ritsuka poked her in the side, making her squeak. “Play nice.”

She stuck her tongue out at him.

“If you two are done messing around,” I said, “you should probably finish your breakfast. The Director won’t be happy if you show up late.”

The two of them grimaced and went back to their food, pausing only long enough to shoot each other a look I couldn’t quite interpret.

“Yeah,” said Rika, uncharacteristically quiet. “Don’t want to piss off Boss Lady.”

I wasn’t one-hundred percent sure what that was about — were they still doing what Romani had told them back when we first brought Marie back? Here and now, however, wasn’t really the time or place to ask about it, so I let the topic drop and polished off my own meal instead.

Somehow, despite being the last person to sit down, I was the first person to finish, and when I got up to take my tray back to Emiya, Arash got up with me, like he was following my lead.

“After you’re done eating, make sure you have everything you need before you head to the Command Room,” I told the twins. “The Director will appreciate it more if you’re late and ready to go than if you’re on time but still have something you need to take care of.”

“Got it,” Ritsuka said. Rika, whose mouth was full and who was in the middle of chewing, snapped off a salute — with the wrong hand.

I didn’t comment on it, just made my way back towards Emiya as Arash gave the twins a smile, a wave, and a short goodbye before he headed over to the door to wait for me.

Emiya was already ready for me and took the tray off my hands almost before I could even offer it to him. He looked behind me at Rika and Ritsuka and said, “I’ll wait until they’re done eating, then make my way over.”

“Right.”

I left right as the twins were starting to finish up, Arash falling into step behind me, and since I was already ready to go, I made my way directly to the Command Room, where Romani, Da Vinci, and Marie would be waiting.

I made it about halfway there before I got a message on my communicator from Romani:

Have you seen the Director? She's running late and she won't respond to my messages.

Shit.

I turned on my heel and headed instead for Marie's office. It was the first place that stuck out at me as where she might go if she was having a moment and trying to get control of herself. If I didn't find her there, then I'd check her room next.

"Master?" Arash asked, a hint of confused concern in his voice.

"The Director isn't...feeling well," I decided on. "I'm going to make sure she's okay."

He accepted that without any further explanation. "Right. I'll make sure to stay out of sight."

Thankfully, the Director's office was closer to the infirmary than it was to the dorms where the Masters and staff stayed, so I didn't run into either the twins or Mash on the way there, and the rest of the staff was otherwise occupied, one way or the other. The only company I had was the hurried clip of my footsteps and Arash next to me, patient and understanding.

A few minutes later, I came upon the door to the Director's office. From outside, I couldn't hear anything, but the place was soundproofed, so that didn't mean anything anyway. The biometric scanner accepted my palm without problem — Marie had added me way back, so that she could tutor me in private, even if she hadn't given me access to her secure files in the process.

Probably better that she hadn't. I wouldn't have been able to resist snooping, especially on the rest of Team A.

The door whooshed open with a hydraulic whir, and I stepped inside alone as Arash vanished into spirit form behind me. Behind the desk — nothing. To the left — nothing, just empty armchairs. To the right — in the corner, huddled in on herself, sat Marie, hugging her knees to her chest and chewing on one of her thumbnails as red blood stained her bottom lip. Her eyes were wide and staring at nothing.

Cautiously, I crept closer to her, making sure not to make any sudden movements or loud noises. Marie didn't even acknowledge that I was there.

"Marie?" I said softly.

She didn't reply. I got closer, close enough that I could reach out and touch her, and slowly, I knelt down next to her. Again, I called to her, "Marie?"

Her eyes flickered in my direction for a moment, and then went back to staring into space. I took that as permission to keep going.

"Is everything okay?"

For a long moment, she didn't reply to that either, and then, slowly, she stopped chewing on her thumbnail, and when it came away from her mouth, it was red, raw, and bloody. She'd chewed it so badly that the nail itself had split open.

"It's going to explode," she told me in a whisper.

My heart clenched in my chest. I didn't need her to explain anything more. I already knew what she was talking about.

"It's going to explode again," she kept going before I could say anything. "It's going to explode and I'm going to die and Chaldea is going to be destroyed and I... I'll be a failure. The world's going to end and it'll be all my fault. The Director who failed the Grand Order."

Gently, I reached out and took her hands, ignoring the blood and spit that wetted my palm. Marie's wide eyes finally turned towards me.

"It's not going to explode," I told her softly. "You're not going to die, I'm not going to die, no one is going to die. Chaldea won't be destroyed."

Her hands trembled.

"How can you know that?" she asked, like speaking too loud would make it real. "It happened before, and I...I was..."

"Because Lev is dead," I said. She flinched, squeezing my hands tightly. "I saw him die myself. Flauros is gone. We're still here. Mash is still here. Romani and Da Vinci are still here. The twins are still here."

I leaned forward a little closer, like I was telling her a secret. "We Rayshifted into two other Singularities," I reminded her. "We resolved them. We defeated the Servants skewing history awry, and we retrieved the Holy Grails they were using to do it. No more bombs went off. There wasn't another sabotage."

"But what if it happens again?" she whispered. She sounded so terrified.

"It won't," I said confidently. "Da Vinci has searched the place up and down, left and right, six ways from Sunday. She knows this place better than anyone. We're so safe that we can even give a former enemy a chance to be an ally, and when the whole world got incinerated, we were the only place that didn't get touched."

Marie closed her eyes. Her lower lip wobbled.

"I'm scared," she confessed to me like it was some terrible sin. I barely managed to hear it.

"I am, too," I told her, just not of the same things she was. "But we have strong people here in Chaldea. We have strong Servants to help us. Trust them to protect us if things get bad. Trust us to make it through, even when it looks like it's impossible. After all." I smiled. "Isn't that what I'm good at?"

She looked up at me, met my eyes. Her lips formed around a word, a name — *Khepri*. I stifled the wince that threatened to cross my face.

“It is,” she said at last, hanging her head as her hands squeezed mine. “That’s why...you’re Team A’s ace Master. You can do what everyone else can’t...even when you have a Director like me holding you back.”

“You’ve never held me back,” I told her firmly. “You’re the only reason I’m even here, remember?”

Her hands squeezed tighter, but she didn’t reply.

“You brought a walking corpse back to life,” I reminded her. “You treated her, taught her, and made her a member of your team. Everything I’ve done since I got here is because you showed me how.” I squeezed her hands back. “And everything we’ve accomplished in your absence is because you gave the right people the right chance at the right time. When everything is said and done, the world will be saved because of *you*.”

“I...I don’t know if I can believe that,” she whispered.

“You don’t have to,” I replied, “because I will. Ritsuka and Rika will. Mash will. Romani and Da Vinci will. If you can’t believe in yourself, Director, then all you have to do is keep moving, and we’ll believe in you instead.” Slowly, I stood. “All I need you to do is be the same Director Animusphere who saved me. I’ll take care of everything else.”

I gave her arms a gentle tug.

“Do you think you can do that?”

“I...” She bit her bottom lip so hard it turned white. “I’ll...have to try. Won’t I?”

“Then if you’re ready to try,” I said, “we have a briefing to get to, don’t we?”

“We do.”

The words came out tremulous and unsure, but she stood up on her own, knees a little shaky, but feet squared and strong. When she lifted her head, the evidence of tear tracks remained, and splotches drying blood were splattered over her bottom lip, but the terrified little girl was gone. Not totally vanquished, but pushed back where she belonged, a little weaker than before.

“Take a minute to clean up a little,” I told her, “and then we’ll go.”

She sucked in a deep breath, closing her eyes for a moment, and nodded, and then she turned away and strode over to the bathroom attached to the office. I waited until the door clicked shut and I could hear the faucet turn on.

“Arash,” I said quietly, so that Marie couldn’t hear me, “thank you for not saying anything.”

He didn’t appear, but across our bond, I heard, *It was no trouble, Master.*

A minute later, Marie came back out, refreshed and ready. If you looked closely, you could still have seen the evidence of her earlier breakdown, but she'd covered it well. She even healed up the cracked thumbnail and washed away the blood, leaving behind no sign of how badly she'd chewed it up.

"Let's go," she said strongly.

"Right."

Go on ahead and meet us there, I told Arash. Better if she doesn't realize you were ever here.

Of course, he replied.

Again, I felt the feather-light brush of something against my prosthetic limb, a faint, unexplained tingle, and I still wasn't sure if that was an intended function or if I was just imagining it.

The door whooshed back open as we left, and side by side, Marie and I walked the empty halls of Chaldea in silence. Of her moment of weakness, we said nothing. She didn't thank me for helping her, and I didn't bring it up, because receiving thanks and praise wasn't the reason why I'd done it in the first place. I didn't need to hear her say the words to know how much I'd helped her and how much she appreciated it.

As we approached the door of the Command Room, however, she suddenly stopped, sucking in a sharp breath. When I looked over at her, her eyes were wide again and her hands were clenched into fists, trembling.

Trauma wasn't an enemy so easily slain.

Gently but forcefully, I pushed the fingers of my prosthetic hand under her own, prying her fist open. I didn't protest when her fingernails dug painfully into the skin, I just gave her hand a firm, comforting squeeze.

Marie jerked, and her head swung around to look at me. I didn't give her a smile or say anything, I just looked back at her, firm and confident, like she could use that surety to bolster herself just by my being there.

It seemed to work. Marie took a slow, deep breath, and when she eased up on the vice grip she had on my hand, her trembling had stopped.

Once again, she didn't say anything or even acknowledge that it had happened at all. She just squared her shoulders, straightened her spine as though she was lifting up her courage, and stepped forward. The door to the Command Room whooshed open — for Olga Marie Animusphere, retreat was no longer an option.

"Good morning, Director," Arash greeted her as we walked in.

Romani and the rest of the group turned to look.

"Director Marie!" the twins called.

“There you are,” said Romani, sounding and looking relieved. “When I couldn’t reach you, I was afraid —”

“There was a last minute emergency that needed handling,” I cut in before he could embarrass her in front of everyone else.

“There was?” he asked, confused.

I shot him a meaningful look and held his gaze until understanding dawned across his face.

“Well, if that was the case, it can’t be helped,” he said, covering up his thoughts with unusual grace.

“A last minute emergency?” asked Mash, worried. “Was something wrong?”

“It’s been handled,” I assured her.

“It’s nothing you need to worry about!” Marie blustered. “Besides, shouldn’t you be more focused on the Singularity? You’re about to Rayshift to it, after all!”

The twins and Mash all straightened. “Right!”

“No need to take it *too* seriously,” said Da Vinci. “After all, we haven’t had any trouble with it since Fuyuki, so there shouldn’t be any problems now either.”

“You say that,” said Rika, crossing her arms, “but we wound up on the other side of the *freaking continent* last time.”

“Ahahaha,” Da Vinci laughed awkwardly, “yes, well... We’re still not entirely sure about why, but that doesn’t mean the same thing will happen again!”

“And now that you’ve said it, it’s basically a guarantee,” Emiya said sardonically.

Da Vinci’s cheek twitched, and her smile became a little forced.

“Anyway,” said Romani, “we went over everything yesterday, so we’re just going to summarize the most important parts before we send you off, okay?”

He turned back to the Director’s console and brought up the map from yesterday.

“As we explained before,” he went on, “this is the best and most recent scan of the Singularity. It looks to be an anomalous sea containing a chain of unrecorded islands. Earlier, it was in flux, but as of the last couple of weeks, the structure of the Singularity itself seems to have stabilized, so we’ve loaded the map data into your communicators for you. Barring any changes that happen after you Rayshift, this is what you’ll be dealing with on the ground.”

“Changes?” asked Ritsuka.

“It’s an anomalous space,” answered Marie. “A sea that doesn’t exist filled with islands that don’t exist. It’s inherently unstable.”

“As the Director said,” said Da Vinci. “The nature of this Singularity is different from the previous ones. Because it’s a place that doesn’t actually exist, expecting everything to be as concrete as it was in France or Rome is a mistake. If it can be made the way it is, then the same force can change it. Maybe not on a whim, but it *can* be changed.”

Like Labyrinth, I thought. We couldn’t even be sure that the mechanism wasn’t similar. It was a Holy Grail — why *couldn’t* it smush together a hodgepodge mess of islands pulled from separate parallel worlds? It might even explain why the place was shifting so much earlier.

I didn’t give voice to my idea. The minutiae honestly didn’t matter. It didn’t change the goal and it wouldn’t change the enemies we had to face.

“Given the nature of the Singularity,” said Romani, “we can’t offer you any idea of what or who to expect when you get there. The only thing we know for sure is the time period — 1573 AD — but without a region or culture matching the real world, that doesn’t mean much of anything.”

“What we *can* tell you is that the one with the Holy Grail is likely to be a sailor of some kind,” Da Vinci picked up. “Failing that, perhaps someone from an island nation, which doesn’t narrow it down as much as we would like it to. Caribbean, Polynesian, Japanese, British, Greek — it could be any of those or none of them.”

“Or Mongolian,” Rika muttered. Her brother elbowed her in the side, and she shot him a glare.

“As for how you’re going to navigate this Singularity,” said Romani, “well... We...don’t really have any better ideas than yesterday. We’re just going to have to hope there’s a ship and crew available for you to sail with, or failing that, that you can summon a hero who has one.”

“No genius inventions for this one, sorry,” Da Vinci added apologetically. “Besides, I didn’t think you guys would much appreciate paddle boats here. It’s a lot of sea to cover in a ride designed for a carnival!”

“Paddle boats?” Bradamante asked, bemused.

“A small boat with two seats,” I answered her. “You make it go by pedaling like a bicycle. The only way to steer it is for one person to pedal while the other doesn’t.”

Emma and I used to ride them together at the fair when I was a little girl. I had a distinct memory, a snapshot of a moment, of us racing after Mom and Dad in their own paddle boat, a big, bold **42** emblazoned in black on the back of the yellowing surface. Mom and Dad smiling and laughing as we chased them.

It was a good memory.

“What about the team?” asked Arash. “Any changes?”

Marie cleared her throat. “After discussing it following yesterday’s briefing, I’ve decided that we’ll allow for Lancer class Servant Bradamante to join the main team for this Singularity.”

“Yes!” Bradamante cheered. “Thank you, Madam Director!”

Marie shot her a glare, and Bradamante quailed, quieting immediately.

“This brings the team to Mash Kyrielight, Ritsuka and Rika Fujimaru, Taylor Hebert, Emiya, and Arash,” she went on. Sternly, she added, “No one else! We need to make sure we have enough available power to accommodate extra contracts that might be made in the Singularity!”

“As the Director said,” Romani agreed. “Other than that, your goal remains the same. Find the Holy Grail pinning this Singularity in place and retrieve it. I shouldn’t need to say, but you’re probably going to have to fight whoever has it.” He sighed. “Again.”

“Hopefully, it won’t be quite so hard a fight as the last one,” Arash said.

Rika groaned. “You jinxed us, Arash!”

“What?” asked Marie, bewildered.

Romani coughed into his hand. “Yes, well. If you need any help, we can send backup, and if it’s an emergency, Da Vinci’s new ‘shadow Servant’ function should let you summon emergency aid. Fortunately, despite its Foundation Value being rank A and its geography being so weird, the time divergence ratio is about the same as it was in Orléans, so we should be able to respond to you much faster.”

“So don’t be afraid to give us a ring if you need anything!” Da Vinci chirped.

Marie rolled her eyes.

“Are there any questions?” asked Romani.

No one spoke.

“Then what are you standing around for?” Marie huffed. “That Singularity isn’t going to correct itself!”

Rika snapped off a salute. “Yes, ma’am, Boss Lady!”

“Go!”

We filed out, us Masters and our Servants heading towards the Rayshift Chamber.

“I was going to wish them luck,” I heard Romani say behind us.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Romani,” Marie scolded him. “They don’t need it.”

Da Vinci escorted us down. Bradamante vibrated with excitement the whole way, like a child waiting for Christmas morning. I guess she was really looking forward to being on the frontline of our next deployment.

When we got there, the massive doors opened with a whir and the hiss of hydraulics, and just as they had been the last two times, four Klein coffins jutted out of the floor, waiting for us Masters and Mash.

Now that the time had actually come to step inside of them, the twins' nerves seemed to have returned, because they were a lot less sure than they had been a few minutes ago. The reality of the situation had set in: we were about to go and risk our lives again, fighting an unknown enemy in an unknown land, with nothing but the clothes on our backs and the Servants we brought with us.

Just to make sure, I checked on my knife and found it exactly where I'd strapped it earlier.

"Here we go again, everyone," said Da Vinci. "You know how it goes."

"Yeah," Rika said quietly.

Our group split up, and we each went to our assigned coffin and stepped inside. I distracted myself from the claustrophobia clawing at my gut by adjusting my backpack as I climbed in, but it didn't help anywhere near as much as I would have liked it to. The thumping of my heart in my chest filled my ears and almost seemed to echo throughout the coffin, small and confined as it was.

Da Vinci came around to check on each of us in turn, one at a time, making sure everything was in order. Last minute checks to keep things from going wrong.

"Everything okay?" she asked me when she got to mine.

"Let's just get this over with," I managed to bite out. It felt like there was no way she couldn't hear my thundering heart, but if she could, she didn't comment on it. Not even to try and convince me to stay back again.

When she was done, she left, and a few seconds later, the lids descended, and with a click, I was locked in. I sucked in as deep and steady a breath as I could, shutting my eyes to shut out the darkness as the door turned thick and opaque.

It felt like an eternity before the intercom outside crackled to life.

UNSUMMON PROGRAM START

SPIRITRON CONVERSION START

Like every other time, a chill swept down my body, and I hugged my bag tighter to my chest. The excitement was almost as strong as the irrational fear gnawing at my belly.

I was going to be getting access to my powers again.

Passenger?

As always, there was no response.

RAYSHIFTING STARTING IN 3...

2...

1...

My coffin lit up with bright light, and a moment later, I was falling, traveling along a canal of stars as my body was pulled through the cosmos. Pinpricks of light swirled around me, turning to streaks, to smears.

ALL PROCEDURES CLEARED

GRAND ORDER COMMENCING OPERATION

For an instant, I hung there, weightless, bodiless, suspended between thoughts, trapped between moments, forever in a second in forever. I was a fly in amber.

And then, gravity reasserted itself, and I landed with a jarring thud on something solid. My feet stumbled in an attempt to keep myself from pitching over, and my stomach jolted in my gut at the sensation of suddenly having weight again.

But something was immediately different from last time, because I couldn't sense anything. There were no bugs hanging about in the soil, no bees pollinating flowers, no worms in the dirt, no spiders spinning webs. I could sense a relative handful crawling about beneath my feet, but it was paltry compared to the numbers I was used to.

When I opened my eyes to the sunlight, I found myself standing not on a stretch of dry land, but on the wooden planks of a ship's deck. A towering mast stood like an ancient oak off to the side, white sails fluttering in the salty breeze, and hemp ropes creaked under the strain of holding them tight and securing them in place.

Next to me, the twins had landed similarly, heads swiveling as they looked around. Mash was with them, shield and armor back in place, and Arash, Emiya, and Bradamante surrounded us like an honor guard.

And beyond them, there was a crew. Sailors, standing about on the deck and hanging from the rigging as they worked the ship and kept it going. A man stood at the wheel, hands in place, frozen, just like everyone else.

For a long moment, we all stood in stunned silence. The group of sailors stared at us, dumbfounded, and we stared back at them, just as confused. Everything seemed to have come to a halt, because even the men on the rigging and the sails had stopped what they were doing and turned to look at us. In the dead silence, the only thing that intruded was the splash of the sea up against the ship's hull, washing over it in crackling waves, and the creaking of the wood as it bent and flexed against itself.

I was the first one to regain enough control to speak, and the only thing that made it out of my mouth was a shocked, ineloquent, "What the hell?"