

Chapter LXXXI: Oceanic Mystery

The next two weeks passed largely without incident. Jeanne Alter attacked anyone and everyone who caught her attention with her sharp tongue and her acidic wit, but that was all the farther she ever took things. At no point had things ever escalated to physical violence, even when Jeanne Alter threatened it or tried to goad our other Servants into starting something.

Fortunately, Emiya's tongue was just as sharp as hers and his wit drier than bone, Siegfried was far too calm and chivalrous to engage the way she wanted, Arash was too unflappable to rise to her bait, and Aife was only too happy to treat her like a petulant child desperate for attention.

As for Shakespeare, she avoided him entirely, the way a rabbit might a fox: as though she was deathly afraid of what would happen if he happened to notice she existed.

I couldn't say he was my favorite person, and of the Servants on our team, he was the one I interacted with least, a status quo I generally happened to like just how it was. But Jeanne Alter seemed outright afraid of him, even if she would rather die than admit it, and I didn't really have any idea why.

In the meantime, everything continued apace, and even with Jeanne Alter's belligerent attitude, things settled back into a kind of normal. Our morning workout sessions with Aife continued, as did the twins' afternoon lessons with El-Melloi II, and Marie slowly eased back into the role of Chaldea's Director.

It wasn't all easy. For all the progress Marie was making, she wasn't going to fully recover in just a couple of weeks, and I was sure that for every miniature breakdown she had in front of me, there had to be at least one more that I wasn't there to see and help with, and I hated that. I hated that there were some battles that I couldn't help her fight.

But following her around everywhere she went, waiting for the moment she needed me? That wouldn't help either. It would send the wrong message, and I knew Marie well enough to know she would slide further and deeper into her doubts, would give more weight to her demons.

I just had to trust that she was strong enough to pull through even those rough spots. With Romani in the Vice Director's chair to more evenly distribute the workload, the only semblance of a mental healthcare professional that we had was just too busy to give her individualized attention. There was nothing anyone could do about it, least of all me.

So, almost six weeks since we came back from the Septem Singularity, I came out of the shower after my workout to find a message waiting for me on my room's console. It was just two short lines of text:

Fourth Singularity Briefing 10:30

I marked the message as read with one hand while I towed my hair dry with the other. Given the brevity of the message, the only person it could have come from was Marie. The time was a little unusual — Marie would normally schedule something like that for at least an hour earlier — but it

made more sense if she was accounting for the routine Aífe put us through every morning. Well, the one she put twins through, more specifically.

It said something that Marie was willing to adjust her own schedule around something like that. I didn't think the Marie I'd first met two years ago would have been that flexible.

Dressed and with my hair blown dry, I left my room about ten minutes later and made the trek down to the cafeteria for breakfast. As expected, the twins and Mash were already there and eating by the time I arrived, with (ugh) Fou nibbling on bits of egg that Mash fed him like he was an ordinary pet cat.

Obviously, Romani had never taught her the dangers of adopting strange animals, or of feeding them when they weren't tame. Just as obviously, it was far too late to do anything about it, since the thing had become the organization's unofficial mascot and Mash treated it like it *was* a beloved pet cat she'd raised from a kitten.

It should have been a lot more suspicious than it was, all things considered. No one knew where it came from, it went about the facility as it pleased without any supervision, and it had ingratiated itself with the staff? That was Master-Stranger behavior straight out of the manual.

Except the most suspicious thing it had done since I got here was hiss at me. It didn't seem to have any magical powers — over other people's minds or otherwise — it followed Mash around more than anything, and the only one who seemed at all affected by its presence was me. Everyone else was either ambivalent about it or treated it the way all things cute were treated.

Alec would probably say that was exactly why it freaked me out.

I tried my best to ignore him while I went to get my food, but that was harder to do with the chill that shuddered down my spine when I passed their table.

"I've noticed you two don't get along," said Emiya as he piled food on my plate. When my brow furrowed, he nodded behind me. I didn't need to turn to look to know that he was referring to Fou.

"Neither do you and Jeanne Alter," I replied calmly.

"True," he acknowledged. "However, Jeanne Alter is confrontational and rude with everyone, so saying she and I don't like each other much isn't particularly insightful. The only one Fou seems to have a hard time getting along with is you."

And that was part of what made it even harder to ignore the instinct to recoil from him. It would be easier to deal with if there was a rhyme or reason behind that feeling.

"It would be a lot easier if I could explain it," I admitted. "But whatever it is, it's not something I can put into words."

Emiya's eyes narrowed, and he paused a second to look past me and over my shoulder, but only for a second.

“I’d worry, but he seems content to be Mash’s pet,” said Emiya. He finished dishing up my food. “If there was something more to it than that, then there’s been ample opportunity to act on it, so I’m inclined to let it be.”

Therein lied *my* problem. The only one whose behavior was unusual was me.

“That’s exactly why I don’t bring it up,” I told him. “The only thing it would accomplish is to make things awkward with Mash. If he makes her happy, then I can just suck it up and deal.”

Emiya huffed, smiled, and shook his head. “I guess that’s why you’re the one leading the Masters.” He set a glass of orange juice down on my tray. “Enjoy your breakfast.”

“Thanks.”

I turned around, and my first instinct was to find an empty seat at an unoccupied table, as far away from Fou as I could reasonably be without someone realizing I was avoiding him. But I wasn’t about to let myself be ruled by that instinct, so I made right for the twins’ table instead.

“Good morning, Senpai,” Rika greeted me through a mouthful of eggs. It sounded more like “Goo’ morn’g, Semmai.”

Ritsuka rolled his eyes. “Good morning, Senpai,” he greeted me after swallowing what he’d been chewing on.

“Morning,” I replied as I sat down. I deliberately ignored Fou’s gimlet eye.

Blessedly, Rika decided that her food was more important than conversation, so breakfast was eaten in relative silence. Aside from the four of us chewing on our meals, the only real sounds came from the kitchen and the murmured conversations of the others still there in the room with us.

Eventually, however, the food was eaten, and Rika relaxed into her chair as much as she was able with a contented sigh.

“I really don’t know how we made it before Emiya came along,” she said wistfully.

“I feel like I’m supposed to be insulted,” her brother said dryly.

She looked over at him. “You gotta admit, Onii-chan, we’ve never eaten as well as we do now. It’s gonna be hard to go back to regular food when this is all over. I might have to steal Emiya for ourselves.”

“I don’t think that’s possible, Senpai,” Mash told her. “Um, without the FATE System, you would have to supply Emiya with magical energy all by yourself, and for a normal human, that’s not possible.”

“I’d figure something out,” Rika said, waving it off.

“Not with your work ethic,” her brother said.

“My work ethic is fine,” she retorted, “it’s just the rest of the world that’s unreasonable. I went to cram school, too, you know. You’re not the only one who had to work your tail off to make it into high school.”

“Just the one who took all the notes you used to study,” Ritsuka said.

“Hey!”

While they were having their fun, I checked my watch. Plenty of time to give the food a few minutes to digest and then make our way down to the Command Room.

“Oh!” Mash, who had seen me, checked her own watch. “That’s right, I almost forgot! The Director scheduled the briefing for the next Singularity today!”

“That’s what that message was about?” asked Rika. “I wasn’t even sure who it was from when I first saw it, it was so short!”

“That’s the Director for you,” said Mash. “She doesn’t like to waste any time.”

“I feel like this is one of those times where she *should* waste a little time,” said Rika. “So that I actually know what I’m getting into.”

“It’s been almost six weeks,” I told her. “There are still another five Singularities we need to correct. We’ve had our month-long break, so now it’s time to get ready to handle the next one.”

Rika groaned and slumped in her seat. “It feels like we just got done fixing the last one! And we *still* haven’t summoned Best Buddy back!”

“I’m sure you could talk to the Director about it,” Mash tried to reassure her.

“Ugh, I know exactly what she’d say.” Rika straightened and drew herself up into a passable imitation of Marie’s famous lecturing pose. “Just because we have several Holy Grails hooked up to our generators now doesn’t mean we can summon Servants willy nilly! Your Best Buddy will have to wait until later!”

Mash giggled a little. “That does sound somewhat like the Director, Senpai.”

“Just a little,” Ritsuka agreed.

“The summoning itself isn’t where the whole thing begins and ends,” I said. “There’s numerous considerations that have to go into it. Remember, if we summon more Servants than the FATE System is prepared to handle, we Masters have to pick up the slack.”

Rika grimaced. “Yeah. Really not looking forward to becoming a mummy at the ripe old age of seventeen.” She blew a breath out past her lips. “Doesn’t mean I have to like waiting. What if Best Buddy’s sword disappears in the meantime? Da Vinci-chan already said that the fact we could bring it back with us to begin with wasn’t normal!”

I wasn't sure Da Vinci would even tell us if it *did* disappear. On the other hand, we had numerous catalysts sitting around, so I didn't consider it impossible that we might have another one tied to Emperor Nero.

Or, if they ever figured out what had happened with Jeanne Alter, she could just try using Saint Quartz to weight the odds.

"They're also still trying to figure out how we got Jeanne Alter instead of the original Jeanne," I said. "The last thing we want to do is perform another summoning and accidentally call up Gilles de Rais. He might convince her to go on a rampage throughout the place."

I wasn't totally sure that he would, but the odds weren't close enough to zero for me to be comfortable with the possibility.

"Ugh!" Rika stuck out her tongue, disgusted. "It's a good thing I already finished eating, because I really didn't need to think about Mister Starfish again."

"I wonder what really did cause us to summon her instead of Jeanne herself," Ritsuka commented. "No matter how I look at it, I don't think we did anything ourselves that could have changed things up like that."

It may have been that there wasn't anything at all, and it was just a fluke. A random interaction between our records and the FATE System. Until Da Vinci could give us all a better answer, the only thing we had to go on was theories.

I checked my watch again, then pushed my chair out and stood up, grabbing my tray along the way. "Let's get going. We don't want to be late to the Director's briefing."

"Think she'd throw us out again?" Ritsuka asked as he stood, too. "Now that we're the last three Masters and everything."

Rika snorted. "Hell no! We're way too important to get tossed aside like yesterday's trash!" She cleared her throat. "Having said that, Onii-chan, if we're late, then I'm blaming you."

"What?" Ritsuka squawked indignantly. "Hey!"

"Your sacrifice will not be in vain!"

And before he could come up with anything else, she walked quickly back over to Emiya to hand in her tray and her plate. Emiya had barely taken them back before she was already speeding towards the door.

"Slow down!" he called after her. "Rika!"

But she ignored him, and Ritsuka rushed to follow her, taking long, quick strides to return his own tray.

"Senpai!" Mash stood, and then she followed, too.

I took it a little slower and walked like a normal person, following the group of them more sedately. Emiya arched an amused, bemused eyebrow at me, little smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth, and flicked his eyes in their direction.

“I guess they’re just that excited about the briefing,” I told him dryly.

“Somehow, I doubt they’re really all that excited for a briefing,” he replied, just as dry. He took my tray from me and set it aside with the others, then undid the knot holding his apron on and took it off, hanging it on a nearby hook. “But if it’s time for the briefing, then I guess that means it’s time for me to take a ‘coffee break’ and make sure I’m up to speed.”

Over his shoulder, he called, “Hey, Marcus!”

A head of dark hair peeked out from the back. “Yeah?”

“I’m heading out for the briefing. You’re in charge of things until I get back.”

“Got it!”

The so-named Marcus came out from the back a moment later, drying his hands on a towel hanging in the front pocket of his own apron. Emiya gave him a wave as he approached, and then disappeared — only to reappear a moment later, having apparently used spirit form to get past the counter in front of him.

At my look, he shrugged. “Saves time.”

“Sure.”

I suppose if you had the ability to conveniently avoid obstacles like that, then it only made sense to use it. It was also just a bit lazy.

We left the cafeteria together, only to find a familiar face on the other side of the door.

“Good morning, Master,” said Arash with a smile.

“Good morning,” I answered automatically. “Were you... waiting for me out here?”

“How dedicated,” Emiya said snarkily.

“Only for a few minutes,” Arash said. He ignored Emiya’s comment effortlessly. “I figured I’d meet up with you on the way to the briefing. Siegfried, Aífe, and the others are already there.”

“And the twins and Mash are on their way,” I finished. “Alright. Let’s get going, then.”

“Don’t want to be late, huh?”

Emiya huffed a chuckle. “She’s probably the only one here who could get away with it.”

I didn't dignify Emiya's remark with a reply, and we set off towards the Command Room, where everyone else was waiting. As expected, we got there with several minutes to spare, and when the door whooshed open, the other Servants were indeed waiting, with the exception of Shakespeare.

"I guess that guy's just not going to see any action," Emiya murmured.

"I think he prefers it that way," I replied. That one skill of his all but confirmed that the battlefield was the very last place he wanted to be.

"Oh!" Bradamante was the first one to catch sight of us. "Master! Sir Arash! Sir Emiya! Good morning!"

"Good morning to you, too," Arash replied amiably.

"Still haven't gotten used to being called Sir Emiya," Emiya muttered under his breath.

"We actually got here before Senpai," said Rika. "Onii-chan, pinch me. I'm not dreaming — ow!"

"You said to pinch you," Ritsuka told her.

"I didn't mean literally!"

The commotion drew the attention of Marie, who was standing at the Director's terminal, Romani and Da Vinci at her side. Her eyes caught me first, and then swept out across the rest of the assembled group.

"Everyone's here?" she demanded rhetorically. "Good! It's a few minutes early, but let's get started!"

"Right, right." Romani cleared his throat. "So, if everyone would come over here?"

We did, crowding around the terminal so that we could all see the screens. It said something about the size that we all managed to fit behind it quite comfortably.

Romani smiled at us all. "Good morning, everyone! How did you all sleep? Ah, those of you who...needed to, I mean, and I guess those of you who wanted to, too?"

Marie pinched the bridge of her nose, grimacing. Jeanne Alter, standing in the back with her arms folded, scoffed and said, "Idiot."

"I wouldn't have said no to another hour or two," Rika answered.

"Romani," said Marie tersely, "this is a briefing, not a departmental meeting. Skip the pleasantries."

Romani laughed awkwardly. "Right, right, my bad." He cleared his throat again. "To recap, so far, we've corrected three Singularities and retrieved the Holy Grail located inside of each one: Singularity F in Fuyuki, Japan, the Orléans Singularity in France, and the Septem Singularity in the Roman Empire. In these Singularities, we've encountered not only Servants on the side of both the Counter Force and the aberrant faction, we've also encountered an entity referring to itself as Flauros. It occupied the body of a colleague of ours, one Lev Lainur."

Marie stiffened next to him, hunching in on herself a little, but didn't stop him.

“At this point,” Romani went on, “we can't be totally sure that this entity is indeed one of the seventy-two Demon Gods summoned and bound by King Solomon of Ancient Israel. Even though Flauros itself is making this claim, it's completely unsubstantiated, even if it *would* make a degree of sense.”

“If there is someone capable of forging multiple Holy Grails and placing them throughout history,” Da Vinci added, “then such a revered figure as King Solomon is certainly on the very short list of culprits.”

“Even so,” Romani said, “we have to take it with a grain of salt. It's not that the possibility doesn't exist, but rather, uh... How should I put this? I think the way I'd say it is...it fits the legend a little *too* well.”

“Isn't that...kind of how Heroic Spirits work though, Doc?” Rika asked, confused.

“At the core of a Heroic Spirit, there has to be a kernel of truth,” Marie took over. “You should have seen it by now, if the reports are anything to go by. On top of that, that Servant from Fuyuki — isn't it just too ridiculous that King Arthur was a girl?”

“That's why I'm a little skeptical,” said Romani. “King Solomon existed in a time before the concept of demons truly existed, so if he had a Noble Phantasm, wouldn't it be something entirely different? That's all I'm saying.”

“I mean, that giant tentacle monster makes it a pretty convincing argument,” Rika said. “Looked pretty demonic to me.”

“I can't say I've ever seen one myself,” Ritsuka hedged, “but Rika's got a good point. It didn't look like anything else I've ever heard of.”

The closest thing I could think of was either Echidna or the flesh garden in Cauldron's basement, neither of which were connections I wanted to draw nor things I wanted to explain right then. I kept my mouth shut.

“You'd be surprised at the variety of Phantasms in the world,” said El-Melloi II. “Having said that, it doesn't look like anything I can remember from the Clock Tower's archives. Someone from the Department of Zoology might have been able to say more.”

“That's a thing?” Rika asked, surprised.

“Considering some of the monsters you hear about in mythology,” said El-Melloi II, “were you expecting that it wasn't?”

“We're getting a little off topic, don't you think?” said Da Vinci. “For now, we should assume that the possibility exists that our ultimate enemy could in fact be King Solomon, and therefore that Flauros — whether he's the genuine article or not — was not working alone. At the very least, that he was also operating under someone else's orders, who may be the real thing or someone else just pretending to be Solomon.”

“It’s better if we just assume that it is,” Marie said. “Until we can find irrefutable evidence one way or the other, it’s better if we’re prepared for that possibility.”

Romani sighed. “Okay, Director. We’ll do as you say. Now, getting back on topic…”

He turned around to fiddle with the keyboard, and on the screens behind him, new images appeared. The left and right ones were filled with what I could only assume was data about the Singularity, meant for those trained to read it, while the center one displayed a large map, filled with almost nothing but an expanse of navy blue.

“This is the next Singularity.”

“But there’s nothing there?” Ritsuka pointed out.

“Is that…water?” Mash asked.

“We’ve spent the last several weeks trying to pry more data out of our scans,” said Da Vinci. “The hope was that we might have a better idea about what we’re looking at and which section of the world this particular Singularity was going to be located.” She shrugged helplessly. “Unfortunately, this map you see here is the best we could do. Our scanners just weren’t up to the task.”

“I told you, there’s nothing wrong with the scanners,” Marie said snippily. “Obviously, whatever is causing the Singularity is distorting space! How else do you explain an unrecorded island chain that doesn’t resemble real geography anywhere in the world?”

“Which is the only real conclusion we can draw,” Da Vinci admitted apologetically. “It’s hard to believe that a single Holy Grail could cause a spatial distortion this severe, but if the owner wished for an endless sea, well, I’d say they got what they asked for.”

“I don’t like it any better than you, but none of us has a better explanation!” said Marie. She huffed. “Anyway, we can’t change what we’re working with, so we’ll make do with what we have. It might be inconvenient, but Chaldea is expected to deal with this sort of thing, and if anyone thinks they can’t, they can just turn around and spend this deployment in their room!”

She glared pointedly at the twins, who nonetheless didn’t quail under her gaze.

“I think we’re all committed to seeing this through, Director,” said Arash. “None of us is going to leave now.”

Marie huffed again. “Good!”

“Da Vinci,” I picked up, “you said this was going to be taking place sometime in the late sixteenth century?”

“Ah, you remembered!” Da Vinci smiled. “Yes — 1573, in fact. Romani, Director, if you would like to continue?”

“I can handle it!” Marie insisted. She drew herself up and cleared her throat a little. “As you can see, the Fourth Singularity, codenamed Okeanos, takes place in the ocean — an endless ocean, so far as

our scanners can tell. However, if you look closely, you should be able to see that there are actually islands. Our Rayshift should be accurate enough to place you safely on one of these, so there's no need to worry about swimming."

"How are we supposed to get around, then?" Jeanne Alter asked mockingly. She leered at Marie. "Unless you're hiding a ship under that skirt of yours, the only way around is to swim, isn't it?"

"Or my chariot," Aífe interrupted. "It worked well enough in Septem."

"Not all that comfortably, though," Rika said.

I had to agree with her. Aífe's chariot worked, if we didn't have any other options, but four people crowded onto it wasn't going to be either comfortable or safe for longer trips, especially on the open ocean.

"We're hoping that there will be a Servant or two with a ship to ferry you around," said Romani. "It only makes sense, right? In an endless ocean, wouldn't the Counter Force summon Heroic Spirits with ships?"

"I hope so," said Mash. "I don't know how to swim."

Since Mash was raised in Chaldea, maybe it wasn't so surprising that she lacked a skill like that. There weren't many places or opportunities for her to learn in Antarctica.

"I do," said Rika, "although I can't *actually* swim from Japan to Newfoundland on my own, you know."

Aífe snorted quietly.

"If necessary, we can attempt a summoning onsite to see if we can call a Rider with a more convenient mode of transportation," said Da Vinci. "I'm afraid we don't have too many solutions dreamed up, so this is a bridge we'll have to cross when we get there."

"As I was saying!" Marie cut in. "Obviously, it isn't possible for the Masters to swim across the ocean to reach each island, so we'll come up with alternatives as and when they're necessary. However, the smaller search area should mean that the location of the Grail pinning this distortion in place will be easier to find. There are only so many islands in this Singularity, after all!"

Unless it's underwater, I didn't say. That wasn't particularly likely, though. The number of heroes with a connection to the sea — more specifically, *under* it — was vanishingly small. The only one that came to mind immediately was Captain Nemo, and now that I thought it, I was half-expecting we would find him somewhere in this Singularity.

"And if the enemy with the Grail also happens to be on a ship?" I asked.

Marie faltered. I felt kind of bad about ambushing her with that question, but it was something that needed to be addressed, because if we were going to be chasing down a pirate — like Blackbeard, for example, who was definitely famous enough to have become a Heroic Spirit — or a famous crew like Jason and the Argonauts, this was going to get a lot more tedious.

“That, I’m afraid, is also something that we’re also going to have to figure out when we get to it,” said Da Vinci, coming to Marie’s rescue. “I’d like to say it won’t come to that, but the fact that this Singularity has been twisted into an endless ocean does kind of imply that our enemy will be a sailor of some kind, doesn’t it?”

Considering the alternatives? I hoped so. I wasn’t particularly fond of the idea of having to chase down Charybdis or something like that.

“W-which is why acquiring a ship of our own is all the more important!” Marie added, recovering. “Not only is it necessary for traversing from island to island, you might need it in order to reach and board the enemy’s ship!”

“Wait,” said Rika. “Wait, wait, wait. You said reach and board. Are you telling me we’re going to go on our very own pirate adventure?”

Marie grimaced, like the very words pained her to hear.

“Well, considering some of the most famous sailors in history are pirates,” said Romani, “that’s not all that unlikely, Rika.”

Rika blinked, looking stunned. “Huh. I need my jar of dirt.”

Ritsuka groaned. I was tempted to, as well.

Marie’s eyebrow twitched. “Jar of...dirt?”

“It’s from a movie series,” Ritsuka informed her wearily.

“Because of course it is.”

“That’s something else you’re going to have to be careful of,” said Romani. “Ordinarily, the sixteenth century is far enough out of the Age of Gods that most ancient mysteries are long gone, but with things twisted up the way they are, it’s not impossible you might find any number of sea monsters hanging around.”

El-Melloi II grunted. “Maritime mythologies always were some of the wildest.”

“So be on the lookout for things like sirens and other sea monsters,” Romani went on. “Arash and Emiya’s Magic Resistance *should* be high enough to resist them, but that doesn’t mean you can take it easy against something like that!”

“Wait,” said Bradamante, “what about me?”

“Ah.” Romani floundered a little. “W-well, you’ll be going along, too, of course, it’s just...”

“You’re a woman,” Da Vinci said bluntly. “Unless there’s something you want to say to us now, the sirens’ voices shouldn’t affect you at all. Even if they could, your Magic Resistance is Rank A, so you’re protected either way.”

“Wait,” said Marie. “We didn’t discuss this. Bradamante going along was never brought up, Romani.”

Romani sighed and rubbed sheepishly at the back of his neck. “Honestly, I just forgot about it, but I *did* promise her she could be part of the main team on this Singularity.”

Marie pinched the bridge of her nose. “Fine. She can go,” she said tersely. “But we’re not sending anyone else! If the team needs to summon a Rider for a ship or contract one that’s already there, we need them to be able to!”

“Right, right,” said Romani. “All the other Servants are staying here.”

El-Melloi II grunted. He looked over at the twins. “Guess you two are getting out of my lessons until you get back.”

Rika turned to Marie immediately. “How soon do we leave?”

“Tomorrow,” Romani answered. “There are still some final adjustments we want to make, and we want you guys to have the night to prepare.”

“What?” Jeanne Alter sneered. “You lot summoned me here, and you’re just going to leave me behind?”

All things considered? Yes. None of us was quite sure we could trust her yet, and if Romani had tried to send her with us despite that, I would have called him out on it right here in front of everyone. Two weeks was not enough time to build that level of trust.

“We Masters have limits,” I told her. “We can’t support our entire roster of Servants all at once, especially not if we have to make contracts with stray Servants in the Singularity. Limiting who goes and who stays is about making sure we don’t spread ourselves too thin.”

“While we’re on that subject,” Da Vinci slid in hurriedly, “I have some news for all of you!” She smiled. “You see, after, ah, the enemy Jeanne Alter used the Grail to summon shades of the Servants you had already defeated back in Orléans, I had an idea. A way for you Masters to make emergency summons inside the Singularity without any input from us here in the facility.”

I straightened. That...sounded incredibly useful.

“Wait,” said Ritsuka, “are you saying we can call anyone we need at any moment?”

Da Vinci held up a finger. “Almost.”

Then, she reached down and picked up a box that had been sitting underneath the console, and she set it down atop it, off to the side of the keyboard. She pulled the lid open, then reached inside and retrieved...

“Tada!”

...the old Rayshift suit, the one that we hadn't been using since Fuyuki. The official name was the Chaldea Combat Uniform, a skintight thing that was also supposed to increase the success of Rayshifts. I guess now I knew why we hadn't used them for Orléans or Septem.

"Meet your new and improved mystic codes!" Da Vinci said brightly. "Complete with enhanced functionality!"

If she was expecting awe, then the response she got was the exact opposite.

"I don't care how new and improved it is," Rika said, "you're not getting me into a goddamn plugsuit unless you give me a giant robot to go along with it."

Da Vinci's smile strained. "I'm...afraid we're all out of those."

"Does it...have to be skintight?" Ritsuka asked uncomfortably.

The smile grew back. "I'm glad you asked!"

She pressed something on the suit, and before our very eyes, it shifted and morphed, twisting and flowing as the fabric unwound into threads of glittering dust and rearranged itself. A moment later, she was holding the standard Chaldea uniform, the one the twins were wearing right now. The female version, anyway.

"The 'plugsuit' version is simply the default," Da Vinci explained. "As long as the amount of fabric remains roughly the same, it can be configured into any pattern we like. We can even load in a design that will let you blend into whatever era we send you to!"

"Wow!" said Rika, grinning. "That's so cool!"

"That *is* convenient," her brother agreed. "This would have been really useful in Orléans for sure."

"How did you accomplish that?" El-Melloi II asked, stunned.

Threads of glittering dust, almost like —

"Nanomachines," I realized.

El-Melloi II turned to me so fast I could have sworn I heard his neck crack. "What?"

"Exactly!" said Da Vinci. "Thanks to a certain device that came into my possession, I was able to reverse engineer these nanomachines and use them to enhance these mystic codes. It let me do all sorts of new things, like adding a self-repair function, a "cushion" function that will protect you if you take a nasty fall, and even internal batteries and this new 'shadow' Servant summoning!"

Her smile showed her teeth. "And one of the best parts? It's designed to connect to a module that will let us change the preloaded spells without altering the actual suit!"

She actually did it, I thought faintly. She studied my nanothorn dagger, and not only had she repaired it, she'd used what she learned from it to make *this*. She reproduced *Tinkertech*.

“How does the ‘shadow Servant’ part work?” I asked.

Fuck, how did I keep underestimating her?

“Quite simply, actually,” Da Vinci answered. “The internal batteries can be used as an emergency energy source, but their intended function is to serve as a reservoir for the Servant you summon. When you summon a ‘shadow’ Servant, what you’re doing is accessing the Saint Graph stored inside the FATE System and creating a temporary ‘copy’ of the Servant in question. Unfortunately, there’s no way for that Servant to get extra energy, not unless you expend a Command Spell, so they’re limited to the amount they’re summoned with.”

“What happens if we run out or get killed?” asked Aífe.

Da Vinci grinned. “The pattern, along with the memories attached to it, returns to the FATE System — to you, in other words.”

“I see,” said Siegfried. “So it will be as though all of us had gone along, even though we’re all still here.”

“Close enough,” said Da Vinci. “The best part of this new function is that it won’t require any actual magical energy from the Masters themselves, so as long as the batteries have had time to recharge, it’ll be entirely self-sustaining.”

So we wouldn’t have to worry about straining ourselves too much. This was...actually a really, really big upgrade from what we’d been using before. Just on the “shadow Servant” function alone, it would be worth using, no matter what it looked like. Everything else on top of it? This thing was going to be a game-changer.

“Wow,” said Rika. “So does it cook and clean, too?”

Da Vinci chuckled, shaking her head. “That’s a little too much to ask for, I’m sorry to say.”

“Still have problems with wearing it?” Marie asked smugly.

Rika looked the new mystic code over. “I mean, I still wouldn’t say no to a giant robot, but I guess that’s not a dealbreaker.”

Romani laughed. “I’m afraid giant robots just aren’t in our budget, Rika.”

“Drat.”

“Either way, this is what you’ll be wearing from now on during Rayshifts,” said Marie imperiously. “You’re a Master of Chaldea, aren’t you? You’ve already faced down the sorts of things that make grown men tuck tail! You’ve stared death in the face a dozen times in the same day! Don’t tell me the *uniform* is going to be enough to make you quit now?”

“No way!” said Rika. She linked her arms with Mash and Ritsuka’s. “We’re a package deal!”

“Then make whatever preparations you need to tonight,” Marie told her. “Tomorrow morning, your mission into the Okeanos Singularity begins!”