

Chapter XIII: Tyranny of the Light

There was a strange moment of weightless nothingness. An eternity passed in a second. A second passed in an eternity. I hung, blind, deaf, deprived of everything, including the sound of my own heartbeat, suspended between one thought and the next, completely disconnected from my own body.

I was the void, and the void was me.

And then gravity reasserted itself. I slammed feet first into the ground, staggering under the return of everything I'd been missing as light, sound, taste, touch, smell, they all returned at once. The food in my stomach threatened to violently pull itself up my throat, and I had to slap a hand over my mouth as my head spun and my thoughts were pulled in a thousand different directions.

Nearby, there were a pair of miserable groans that told me the twins had made it, too, relatively unscathed.

Fuck. If that was what Rayshifting was like normally, I was suddenly thankful that I'd been unconscious the first time it happened.

"I'm *really* regretting having an extra helping of Emiya's pancakes," Rika said queasily.

"I'm regretting eating any breakfast at all," Ritsuka agreed faintly.

I closed my eyes for a long moment, trying to settle my own stomach, but the disorientation from the Rayshift was proving difficult to shake off. I still didn't feel entirely there, in fact. There was a strange disconnect between my head and my body, a thinness to my thoughts, like both I and my very essence were spread out through the land around us, into the soil, the air, the trees in the near distance.

To the side, Mash let out a tired sigh. "We managed to make it here safely, Senpai, and we're all intact. Rayshift successful. I'm glad it still worked properly, now that it was an intentional Rayshift instead of the accidental one that took us to Fuyuki."

"Fou, fou!"

I blinked, trying to steady my thoughts, and looked at the little creature perched on top of Mash's shoulder.

"Fou?" Mash asked. "Did you tag along, again?"

"Fou!"

"I guess that answers the question of whether Fou can Rayshift," Ritsuka said as he walked over to Mash. He held out a hand, finger extended, and Fou nipped at him playfully.

“He must have snuck into one of our coffins.” Mash reached up and gave it a scratch behind the ears. “Fortunately, that means he’ll come back with us when we Rayshift out of this Singularity, so as long as we keep him safe, we shouldn’t have to worry.”

The world spun, swinging wildly from right to left and up to down. Rika didn’t seem any more bothered than her brother as she joined him, petting Fou a little herself.

“He’s a little troublemaker, isn’t he?” she asked. “I guess he must really want to get out of Chaldea, too. Maybe he got a little restless, having to look at those white walls every day.”

“Maybe.” Mash’s smile disappeared as she looked over my way, and her brow furrowed with worry. “Miss Taylor? Are you okay?”

“F-fine,” I managed to say, but my lips felt weird saying it. I tried to stand up straight, but I almost pitched over sideways before I caught myself.

“Senpai!”

“Miss Taylor!”

Naturally, the others didn’t take me at my word, and they rushed over, fussing over me, just close enough that they could catch me if I fell.

“Is something wrong?” Rika asked.

“Maybe she’s having a reaction to the Rayshift,” Ritsuka suggested.

“She was fine in Fuyuki!” Rika said.

“We don’t know how she was when she arrived,” Mash pointed out. “After all, we didn’t see her immediately after we landed. She might have been like this last time, too.”

“Is there anything we can do?”

Mash’s helpless grimace wasn’t the answer she probably wanted.

“I’m...”

I closed my eyes, and the galaxy spun under my eyelids. It only made my disorientation worse.

“I...”

My head tilted and wobbled. My center of gravity was off, skewed. No, my proprioception, because I still felt like I was extended out into the world around me. I was stretched too thin, pulled in too many directions, and my body couldn’t figure out how to handle that.

The twins exchanged a helpless, frightened look.

“We need to contact Doctor Roman,” Mash said.

Something flitted in the periphery. I tried to follow it with my eyes and turned my head, but it was already gone, spinning around and swerving around behind me before I could find it. Whatever it was, no one else had apparently seen it.

“Right,” Ritsuka agreed. “He’ll know what to do.”

The something flitted past again, and my head swiveled as I tried to watch it, but it was moving too fast and too erratically, and when I tried to focus my eyes on it, there was nothing there.

But there was. I knew there was. I could feel it, see it, even if my eyes couldn’t quite pick it out. It flitted past again, and I caught it out of the corner of my vision as it moved past me again. Whatever it was, it was fast.

“I need to establish a summoning circle,” Mash said. “But — oh, we need to find a ley line for that, don’t we?”

“I don’t think Senpai’s up for walking,” said Rika.

“There has to be somewhere we can put her while we look. Maybe if one of us stays behind?”

“That’s no good, Master. What if you get attacked while I’m away? There’s no one to protect you, and Miss Taylor isn’t in any shape to help.”

If I just waited a moment, waited for it to pass by, I should be able to — *there*.

My hand whipped out, lightning fast, and closed around the something I’d been seeing. The others cut off and turned to me, and they watched as I twisted my wrist around, uncurled my fingers, and revealed my target.

A ladybug.

My stomach twisted.

“Miss Taylor?”

“Senpai?”

No. No, it wasn’t possible. Was it?

The ladybug on my hand stayed, utterly still and completely motionless. I gave it a mental prod, both akin and not to the way I’d talked to Caster when I was his Master, and the ladybug fluttered its wings once, then returned to placidity.

“Miss Taylor? Are you okay?”

There was no way. We were almost six hundred years in the past. It was still five hundred some years too early. There was absolutely no way this could be what I thought it was. Could it?

Passenger?

There was no answer. But then, there never had been, had there? The closest thing we had ever gotten to communicating with each other was at the end, where the line between us had blurred until even I wasn't sure which of us had been in control and which was the passenger.

I relaxed my mental grip on the ladybug, and it unfurled its wings and took off now that I was no longer controlling it directly. I watched it go, first with my eyes, and then when my eyes lost track, with that familiar new other sense, that extended proprioception.

"I'm more than okay, Mash."

It made sense, now, the disorientation. I *was* spread out into the soil and the grass and the trees — into the plethora of bugs inhabiting them, the worms and the ants and the beetles and the bees. It was just that I'd forgotten what that felt like, being just one part of a larger whole. Having a swarm to disappear into.

"I'm better than I have been in over two years."

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, and the galaxy behind my eyelids took on new meaning now that I knew exactly what each point of light was. If I reached out, I could touch each and every single one of them, could know them down to their most intimate details, no matter how gross or weird. They were all under my control, were I merely to flex my will and command it so.

And so I took an iron grip on that galaxy, and I forced it into a familiar shape, weaving the mental position of each star and each planetoid and each and every part until I was at the very center, inevitable, inexorable, like a black hole.

When I opened my eyes again to the concerned faces of my comrades, I realized I was smiling.

Rika and Ritsuka both looked unnerved, like they hadn't seen anything like it on my face before and they weren't sure how to deal with it. At that moment, I didn't particularly care.

I'd spent two years trying to escape the trap of being a "normal" human again, and I'd just been handed a part of me I'd lost. Of course I was happy.

My legs straightened and I rolled my shoulders as I stood properly. I was still a little disoriented, but that would pass as I got used to my expanded proprioception again.

"We need to find a ley line to tap into, right?" I asked. "We need to perform that summoning as quickly as we can. There's no telling whether or not we were noticed on the way in."

Mash jolted. "R-right! Yes, Miss Taylor! U-um, give me a moment, I'll try and find a direction, at least."

I turned to the twins. "What do you two know about the Hundred Years War?"

They shared a somewhat panicked look, like a pair of students who hadn't realized there was going to be a quiz and they hadn't studied.

"Um..." said Rika.

“It’s a war that lasted a hundred years?” Ritsuka ventured.

I bit back a sigh.

I had to be patient, I reminded myself. They were just kids, kids in over their heads, and they had none of the experience or the formal training I and the rest of Team A had gone through. It wasn’t like I could expect a Japanese high school to teach about a complicated political quagmire in faraway France from six hundred years ago, either.

“The war itself wasn’t actually fought nonstop the whole hundred years,” Mash told them helpfully. “1431, the year we’re in, was actually one of the lulls in the fighting. Which isn’t to say there wasn’t any fighting at all, only that it wasn’t as intense as it was at other points of the war. It wasn’t uncommon at times like these for captured knights to be ransomed back instead of kept prisoner or executed — Senpai?”

Ritsuka was no longer paying attention; something had caught his eye, and he was staring up into the sky, head tilted back and mouth slightly open. There wasn’t anything I could feel with my bugs, so I looked up to see —

What?

“Something wrong, Onii — whoa.”

What the fuck was that?

“Oh,” Mash said faintly.

“Senpai,” Ritsuka began slowly, “what *is* that?”

It was probably supposed to be flattering that he thought of me as so knowledgeable.

“I don’t know,” was the only response I could give him.

A ring of light hung in the sky, utterly massive and impossibly distant. It looked like the storm wall of a hurricane, seen from the eye of the tempest, and with how far up it was, it had to encircle the entirety of the Singularity. Outside of it was normal sky, everyday blue dotted with clouds, but inside of it was dark, like all of the light that should have been there was being sucked into the ring, repurposed into...whatever it was that ring was supposed to be doing.

Nothing good, almost certainly. It reminded me of Phir Se’s attack, the one he used against Behemoth in India. Not in shape, but in scale and function. How devastating would it be if all of the energy bound up in that ring were unleashed at once?

Another thought occurred to me.

“Was this in Fuyuki, too?” I wondered.

There was no way to be sure, because the clouds had hidden the sky the entire time, but it was possible, wasn’t it? Something that enormous, that high up, that was obviously not natural, so it

must have been related somehow to these Singularities. Was it the cause? Or did it form the boundary of the altered spacetime, encircling everything that had been twisted out of its proper shape?

Beep-beep!

“...and we’re connected!” Romani’s voice said brightly. “Mash, Ritsuka, Rika, Taylor, it looks like the Rayshift succeeded without any problems, you’re — is something wrong? What’s everyone looking at?”

“Just a moment, Romani,” I said, “I’ll send you a visual.”

I lifted one arm up and over my head, taking aim with the comms device on my wrist, and then pressed a button on the band, like I was streaming a video from a camera. I couldn’t say I understood how it all worked or why he could get a look at our faces but needed one of us to see anything outside our immediate vicinity, but it was probably one of those limitations that the technicians understood and I just had to pretend I did.

He was observing us in an altered spacetime from six hundred years in the future. This was already pretty miraculous.

“Whoa,” said Romani, eyes wide.

“Any idea what we’re looking at, here?”

“Some form of magecraft cast over satellite orbit?” he guessed. “There’s no record of a phenomenon like that in historical 1431, so it’s definitely related to the Singularity somehow, but without a better read on it, I don’t have the first clue how. In any case, it’s absolutely massive. I think it’s big enough to cover North America entirely.”

“That’s...”

Way bigger than I thought.

The Simurgh, maybe Leviathan or Behemoth, Scion, they all could have probably done something like that. Capes, though? This was way beyond them. Magi, too. Just going by what I knew, making something on that scale at that distance, there was no magus alive with the raw power needed to pull it off.

Thinking back to that fount of magical energy in Fuyuki, though...

“Do we think it’s related to the Holy Grail, somehow? A sign of its manifestation?”

“It’s possible, but I doubt it,” said Romani. “I’m sorry, there’s just not much I can tell you about it. We’ll have to analyze it further from our end and see if we can’t determine more about its purpose or origins.”

I grimaced. Yeah, I hadn’t been expecting much. It was worth a shot, at least.

“Thank you, Doctor Roman,” said Mash.

Romani chuckled in that self-deprecating way of his. “It’s literally my job now, so don’t worry about it. Speaking of jobs, though. I hate to be pushy, but you guys should get moving. Things are safe for now, but there’s no telling what attention your Rayshift might have drawn, and standing around out in the open just makes you huge targets.”

“Good point,” I agreed.

“There are no Servants nearby, right?” Rika asked suddenly. There was a tightness to her voice.

Ritsuka glanced at her, brow furrowed. Romani shook his head.

“The only Saint Graph I can detect within a mile of you is Mash. You’re all in the clear, for now, at least as far as I can tell. Still.”

“Yes,” said Mash, nodding. “First, we have to find a ley line. Then, Miss Taylor will attempt to summon a Servant to assist us in this Singularity. From there, we should begin our investigation of this Singularity.”

“Be careful,” Romani cautioned. “I shouldn’t need to tell you guys, but there’s no way of knowing who or what your enemy will wind up being. Don’t go picking fights you don’t have to, but don’t expect everyone you meet will be happy to see you.”

And with that happy bit of advice delivered, his image vanished.

“So, where do we find a ley line, exactly?” Ritsuka asked.

“We’re looking for a terminal, a place where magical energy converges, like we did in Fuyuki,” Mash explained. “It’s not always the case, but most cities are built atop at least one, because strong ley lines tend to result in prosperity for those who live atop them.”

Ritsuka nodded. “So if we want to find one of these Ley Line Terminals, we have to find a city first, right?”

“We’ll need to scout it out, first,” I put in. “If we go rushing in without any idea of who’s where, we could get mistaken for an enemy patrol by whichever side is quartered there.”

Ritsuka looked at me. “Whichever side?”

“The English controlled large parts of France throughout the latter half of the Hundred Years War,” said Mash. “It was only after Jeanne d’Arc helped to turn the tide and Charles VII was officially crowned that the tide began to turn and England lost some of its grip. Even at this point, however, the English still had large numbers of troops and mercenary contingents stationed in various parts of France.”

“Do we have any idea where we are now?” I asked her.

Mash pursed her lips and brought up her wrist; I couldn't see the hologram clearly enough to read what must have been a map.

"The geographical map Da Vinci made for us shows that we're a few miles north of Domrémy, close to Vaucouleurs. That might be a good place to start."

Mimicking her, I brought up my own map, an exquisitely detailed thing that looked more like a picture taken by a satellite than something that had been drawn by hand, with settlements labeled in bold, stark letters and our own position denoted by a bright, red dot. Sure enough, we weren't all that far from Vaucouleurs, although it wasn't like it was just over the hill, either.

I nodded. "Then that's where we'll start."

"Based upon our current position, it should take us about an hour and a half to reach Vaucouleurs."

Ritsuka's face twisted into a tight grimace, and Rika let out a long, miserable groan. I pretended I hadn't heard it.

"We'd better get going, then."

"Senpai is a slave driver," Rika muttered.

I pretended I didn't hear that, either.

Despite their complaints and their grumblings, the twins didn't try to drag their feet when we started walking. Maybe Fuyuki had impressed upon them the severity of the situation, the true weight of the stakes we were playing for, or maybe they just didn't want to be thought of as weak or incompetent compared to the tall, skinny American girl.

Maybe the little speech I'd given them at the base of the mountain had stuck, or maybe I'd struck a chord two weeks ago. There wasn't a way for me to be sure, and I wasn't about to just come out and ask if they'd grown up between then and now.

"What do we know about Vaucouleurs?" I asked Mash as we went.

She frowned thoughtfully. "It *should* be French-controlled, at this point of the War. Jeanne stayed there briefly, while she was waiting to receive an audience with Charles VII. A garrison of the French levies should be stationed there."

It was tempting to think of that as "friendlies." Especially as an American, the States' somewhat biased view of English aggression made the French the "good guys" of the Hundred Years War. The reality of it was that we weren't likely to be well-received, for a lot of reasons, but mostly because the French would be suspicious of strangers showing up out of nowhere for any reason, let alone something as ludicrous as correcting historical inaccuracies.

The fact that America wouldn't exist for another three-hundred years wouldn't make convincing anyone any easier. The fact it was another five-hundred before a concept like the UN would even be imagined, let alone convened, wouldn't help, either.

We could pretend to be travelers, maybe, but it was going to be hard managing it, when we were decked out in our fancy mystic codes and carrying nothing but the clothes on our backs. Of course, the biggest problem might wind up being the one that had nothing at all to do with any of that.

“And if the deviation from proper history is that Jeanne never left home to seek out Charles VII?”

What if the English won the Hundred Years War?

Mash grimaced. “In that case, restoring events to how they were supposed to be might be much more difficult.”

“It’s that bad?” Ritsuka asked.

“Jeanne d’Arc almost single-handedly turned the war around for the French,” I said. “If she was delayed for some reason and the English gained too much of an upperhand, or worse, if Jeanne died before she could make it to Charles VII’s court...”

Would we have to take her place?

My lips twitched. Taylor Hebert, the Maid of Orleans? What a thought that was. Even if my last name had French origins, trying to say I had that strong a connection to the land of my ancestors was stretching it by a country mile, wasn’t it?

“Or maybe,” Mash said lowly, “Jeanne was never captured, and the only way to restore the proper course of history is to ensure she’s executed.”

The twins both gasped. “W-what?”

“That’s a distinct possibility as well,” I said with an impossible nonchalance. The agitated buzz of the local insects would have given away how much that thought bothered me, if anyone here knew to look for it.

“S-Senpai!” Rika said. “You can’t mean — !”

“Our job is to correct history gone awry,” I told her. “The form that takes isn’t always going to be pretty or palatable.”

“You want us to be *murderers*,” Ritsuka accused me hotly.

I thought, for a second, of one of my greatest regrets, staring down an innocent toddler and knowing, *knowing* that I could be wrong, *knowing* that she might have been entirely unrelated to the prediction that Jack Slash would cause the apocalypse, *knowing* that there wasn’t any certainty her kidnapping fit into all the predictions...

And pulling the trigger anyways, because whether it was true or not, whether she was related to the end of the world or not, it was a kinder fate than letting Jack sink his claws into her and raise her as one of his Nine.

But calling it a mercy didn’t make it any less of a murder.

“We are whatever we need to be to restore humanity, Ritsuka, Rika, no matter how uncomfortable that makes us. *That* is what it means to be a Master of Chaldea.”

“Senpai... No. Master,” Mash said. “If we don’t do this, then humanity itself will be erased. Everyone in the entire world will be incinerated.”

“Mash...” Ritsuka said, voice raw.

I took pity on them.

“We don’t know what we’ll need to do, anyway,” I said. “You heard Romani. The likely cause of the deviation in the first place is a Holy Grail, like the one Saber had in Fuyuki. Throwing history off course without one simply isn’t possible. Retrieving that should be our first goal, and once we have it, things might return to normal on their own.”

The twins...didn’t seem reassured by that, exactly, but some of the tension left them. I didn’t tell them that it wasn’t going to be that easy, and frankly, after how many close calls we’d had in Fuyuki, they should have already known that. The fact we’d all come away uninjured didn’t mean Medusa hadn’t been incredibly close to killing all of us, before Cúchulainn had stepped in to lend a hand.

Talk of having to kill Jeanne had murdered the conversation, though, so we kept walking mostly in silence. The only thing I could do was hope that it wouldn’t come down, at the end of it, to having to personally kill a celebrated martyr whose only crime was wanting to help her country push out an invading nation.

Some part of me hoped that our final enemy would be a living person, someone we could simply take the Grail from by force without too much trouble. Failing that, have it be a Servant, someone who was already dead and had no future to speak of. Killing a Servant might have been harder, but it would be easier on everyone’s consciences.

I had a niggling dread that it wasn’t going to be that clean, though. Maybe I was being a pessimist, but nothing in my career had ever been so simple and easy.

Another hour passed mostly in silence as we traversed the French countryside, with the sun shining down on our backs and the ring of light hanging above like the watchful gaze of some distant god. With nothing else to hold my attention, I found myself thinking wistfully about what a shame it was that we couldn’t enjoy the simple beauty of the land around us, the lush grass, the beaten dirt road, the fields of flowers and the clear sky.

What little girl hadn’t wanted to visit Paris when she grew up, if she had the chance? To see the old world in all its majesty, where so many important, historical events had occurred? Who wouldn’t want to walk through and glimpse the hamlets and little villages whose buildings still hadn’t quite caught up with the times, almost perfectly preserved snapshots of yesteryear, like a bee trapped in amber?

Here we were now, in a time when those places were still young and new, and we just couldn’t take the time to see them, not with the threat of an unknown enemy looming in the distance.

I guess even I still had that little girl inside me somewhere.

Unprompted, Mash lifted her wrist and brought up her map again. “There’s a small forest up ahead,” she said quietly. “Once we’ve passed through it, Vaucouleurs should come into view.”

“And then we get Senpai a Servant,” Rika mumbled.

I swallowed.

I was still nervous. If I got someone like Cúchulainn, that would have been fine, I think. A great hero who could really lend us a hand, that would be best, both for my own sanity and for very practical reasons. Perhaps not King Arthur, now that I’d seen her dark side, but Achilles or Heracles or some other great name, any of those would work well.

Summoning an Assassin was what I dreaded.

Calling the forest we entered a forest was a bit of a misnomer. The beaten path we were walking along was broad, likely having been cleared for the purposes of troop deployments or trade routes, and the trees around us were sparser and further spaced than, say, a tropical rainforest, with far less underbrush. The only wildlife in the vicinity was mostly birds and a few small mammals, and they were all keeping far away from us.

And then, as the other end of the forest came into view, we heard it.

A roar.

We all froze. The twins shared a look, and then turned to me and Mash. “What was that?”

Another roar, clearer this time, louder. My brow furrowed, because I was sure I must have been mishearing it.

“That...”

“Senpai?”

“It doesn’t match anything I’ve ever heard from documentaries,” Mash said slowly.

Because it wouldn’t, would it? I’d watched documentaries, too, heard lions, tigers, bears, all sorts of different animals yip, yowl, snarl, and growl, and they were all distinctive in their own way. You could mistake one big cat for another, but never a lion for a bear or a tiger for an elephant.

This... I’d heard this from only one thing before.

“There’s no way. Not here.”

“Senpai?” Rika asked nervously.

I took off at a dead sprint, racing towards the edge of the woods, and as I went, I gathered up as much of a swarm as I could, pulling them forward with me. I didn’t have time to grab whatever spiders lurked in their hiding places, and my collection wound up eclectic and mostly harmless, because there just wasn’t much to choose from in terms of dangerous or venomous bugs.

One nest of wasps would just have to do.

Up ahead, I was already sending whatever fliers I could into the air to try and scope things out, to try and prove my worst instinct wrong, but my hand still went to my knife, the very knife that now might be the only real weapon I had against the kind of enemy that I was definitely not prepared to be facing in mid-fifteenth century France.

I cleared the forest, and further on down the road, a small town with a fortified garrison came into view as I jolted to a sudden stop.

“Senpai!”

“Miss Taylor!”

The others came up behind me.

“Senpai, what’s wrong?” Ritsuka asked. “Do you know —”

Mash gasped.

My lips pulled into a grimace, and I glared ahead at our enemy as though I could set it alight with my stare alone.

An enemy I’d fought before, from a certain point of view. Not the genuine article, but one that managed a decent enough imitation that he’d named himself after the word for it in a different language. A creature of myth and legend, the epitome of power and strength, a symbol of avarice and evil.

Once, my swarm had emasculated him. Once, I’d carved out his eyes. Once, he had burned off my ruined arm, because the alternative was to let it cripple me for the rest of the fight.

“*Dragons.*”