

## Chapter II: Inauspicious Beginnings

Somewhat ironically, the first thing I noticed was the hunk of rock digging into one of my kidneys.

Not the heat of the flames that smoldered what seemed like everywhere around me. Not the hard street I was lying on. Not the thick smell of smoke that lingered and clung to everything. It wasn't even the fact that I was no longer pinned beneath a huge piece of rubble.

No. The thing that I noticed first was the sharp, jabbing annoyance pressing into my back just an inch or two to the left of my spine, so insistent that I had no idea how it hadn't woken me up sooner.

I rolled over, grunting, and my hand smacked against something hard and very much solid.

Ow.

My nose wrinkled, and when I cracked open my eyes, I realized quite suddenly that I was no longer in Chaldea.

My first thought was actually that I might be in Hell.

I was never really a believer in any sort of religion. The Heberts were technically a Christian family, in the same sense as anyone else who paid the idea lip service was, but if we'd ever gone to church on Sundays, I'd been so young that I didn't remember it. Later on, well, it got harder to believe in a benevolent, omnipotent god watching over everything when cities got wiped off the map once every three months or so.

But if there was a Hell, I wouldn't have been surprised to find myself there when I finally died for good.

After the funny jolt that hit me in the stomach, though, I thought better of it and smirked at my own melodrama. Fire and brimstone? A city destroyed, with buildings collapsed and everything falling apart? That wasn't Hell. That was Brockton Bay on a Tuesday.

Gingerly, I pulled myself to my feet and looked around. Aside the fading ache from that hunk of broken asphalt that had been trying to gouge out my kidney, nothing seemed broken or injured, and neither my leg nor my left arm ended in a stump — small mercies, considering how quickly I seemed to go through limbs — but that was the only bit of good news I could give myself.

“So if this isn't Chaldea anymore, where am I?” I muttered.

The last thing I remembered...

It was hard to grasp. Hazy. Considering how much smoke I must've been choking on, maybe that wasn't all that surprising. It was something of a minor miracle I wasn't hacking up my lungs, right then, all told.

But I remembered... There'd been a voice. Automated. The kind of prerecorded messages used by emergency service announcements. Something about Chaldea being fucked and no available Master candidates — yeah, because everything had gone to shit and anyone who wasn't already dead had been dying.

And then... I think I'd been Rayshifted. Somehow. Without a coffin. Which was supposed to be dangerous or even outright lethal, but hey, I was still breathing, so I wasn't about to complain too much.

Where to, though? An equally important question was also “when.”

“Something with an F,” I mumbled to myself. “Fu... Fuyuki, I want to say. In...Japan, I think? Right. A place I've never heard of, though. And then the when... Early 2000s, I want to say?”

What could have happened here that it was a point needing correcting, though? The early 2000s... On Earth Bet, that could only have been Leviathan, but this...

I looked back around. The city in flames greeted me, drowning out the stars with orange light and blanketing the sky with black smog.

*This* was not Leviathan. Not by a longshot.

I wasn't sure I could have done anything about it, even if it was. What, correct the Leviathan attack on Kyushu so that it didn't happen? Me and what army? Without backup from Chaldea, I couldn't even summon a Servant to even things out.

“Wait.”

My head swung around again, but the scenery hadn't changed. More importantly, I was still alone.

“Master candidates seven, forty-eight, and forty-nine... So where are forty-eight and forty-nine?”

If the program had registered them at the same time as me, then they had to have been in the room with me when the Rayshift happened, which meant that they must have been shunted back to this place, too. They should have landed here somewhere.

But there was no sign of them.

Maybe where they'd been dropped corresponded with how far away they'd been from me in the room before, but if that was the case, the room was only so big, so shouldn't they have still been within line of sight? Unless it wasn't a one-to-one thing, and that meant they could be clear on the other side of the fucking city, because of course, that was just my luck, wasn't it? My only allies within reach, separated from me by miles of labyrinthine streets, deep in hostile territory.

I grimaced.

“Or maybe I lucked out and survived, and the other two got smeared across time and space the way we were all warned about.”

Either way, it looked like I was alone in hostile territory against unknown enemies of unknown numbers and unknown capabilities. I had no backup, I had no allies — at least as far as I was aware, at any rate — and no hope of exfiltration. My only resources were the Mystic Code I was currently wearing and whatever meagre supplies I might be able to round up from what remained of this city.

A city I'd never been to and whose layout was also a complete unknown.

I sighed.

Great.

Against my will, my lips pulled into a smile. “So, it’s Tuesday,” I said.

No use moping around or whining about the unfairness of it all. I could honestly have said I'd been in worse spots than this.

“Alright. First things first.”

Basic survival had been one of the lessons we'd gotten in the Wards. Generally, it had been stuff about what to do if you were stranded in the wilderness, but urban survival had been covered to some degree, too, and what hadn't been covered directly, well, there were some parts of survival techniques and priorities that were basically universal.

The first and most important thing was shelter. Unless you were one of the rare capes with powers that normalized temperatures around your body, exposure was the quickest thing that could kill you. Three days without water and three weeks without food — it wouldn't be comfortable the entire time, but you could survive it. Exposure could kill you in under an hour. If I remembered the statistics right, it was the number one cause of death for the homeless.

So. I needed to find some place to hunker down and establish a base of operations. I had no idea how long I was going to be there, not the faintest clue if there was even anything left of Chaldea's staff to stage a rescue, and I had to work under the assumption that I was completely alone.

“Only problem... I'm not seeing much in the way of intact buildings around here.”

And the ones that were might not be for very long.

My lips pursed, but looking around didn't really change the facts. There wasn't much else I could do except pick a random direction and hope it led me somewhere better off.

“Preferably on higher ground, so I can get a better look at the layout of the city itself.”

It looked like I was on a main street, too, so if I was lucky, I'd find a supermarket or something that could double as a dependable supply of food. Whether or not it had any power would be hit or miss, and if the city was as abandoned as it looked, that wouldn't last forever anyway, but there should still be enough canned and boxed food to last at least a little while.

If that even meant anything, now. There was no way of knowing exactly how this Singularity connected to the larger world, so it was entirely possible that I could spend months surviving off of

cereal and canned peaches without seeing any other person, and no one would ever come to investigate the city that had inexplicably vanished off the face of the Earth.

I glanced back up at the sky, but with the smoke and the clouds so thick and dark, there was no way of knowing what time of day it was. Hell, it was entirely possible that it was actually the middle of the afternoon, but with roiling black blanketing everything from horizon to horizon, it might as well have been three in the morning.

My finger looped through the collar of my jacket, tugged. Not cold, but that might be because it seemed like the entire city was going up in flames all at once. It was supposed to be almost February here, wasn't it? In that case, I wanted to have a setup in place before the fires went out and I was stuck in the winter chill.

“Alright.”

A chanced look behind me showed me the same destroyed city as in front of me. Didn't look like it was going to make a difference either way —

A sudden scream pierced the air, high-pitched and feminine, and I whirled around towards the direction it came from.

Master candidate forty-eight was a girl, wasn't she?

I was running before I even had time to think about it, my legs pumping, my arms swinging, my body going through the remembered and practiced motions of what felt like an entirely different life. My thoughts had been erased, and only a singular focus remained as I sprinted towards the voice. The unfamiliarity around me disappeared, became familiar, became something I recognized.

I'd never been to Fuyuki before in my life.

In fact, if you'd asked me to point it out on a map, I couldn't have done it to save my life. Hell, it was entirely possible that it was sunk with Kyushu on Earth Bet when Lung and Leviathan decided to stage their own live action Godzilla movie — no idea which one would have been Godzilla in that metaphor, but fuck it.

In spite of that, though...

The shattered pavement. The crumpled buildings. The glow of the flames that lit up the dark. The sense that danger lurked around every corner and you were never safe.

It felt like coming home.

Maybe in proper human history, Fuyuki was a perfectly normal place to live with perfectly normal people and no biweekly gang wars or rage dragons to disrupt its perfectly ordinary everyday life.

Right here, right now, however... If I was five years younger, it would have felt like my first night out, charging Lung with nothing but bugs and pepper spray.

It wasn't long before I saw them, a horde of walking skeletons, human. They were dressed in rags and scraps of cloth and their bodies were barely held together by whatever magic had reanimated them in the first place. Each of them had a weapon, a spear or a sword, and they were moving with surprising speed — fast enough that anyone who wasn't as used to running as I was probably wouldn't be able to outrun them.

Past them, I didn't have a clear enough view of the person to tell who it was, but I caught snatches of color, the clothes of whoever it was they were chasing. Black and yellow, entirely wrong for Chaldea's combat uniform.

Were there actually natives still alive in this place?

“Why do things like this always happen to me?” the person shrieked hysterically.

Something flashed, and one of the skeletons crumpled into dust. Again, and another one disappeared. It wouldn't make a difference, though, not at that rate. There were just too many skeletons.

It wasn't like I would be doing any better. My options weren't exactly the best. But...

I skidded to a halt, lifting my arm and bracing it with my other hand as I took aim at the backs of the crowd that hadn't yet noticed me. Something in my head snapped, and I had the fleeting image of a thread of silk breaking, and then I channeled my meagre magical power through my combat uniform the way I'd been taught.

...I wasn't the type of person who could just callously watch someone die like this.

*Gandr!*

A ball of black energy leapt from my hand. Without my bugs, I wasn't anywhere near as good a shot as I used to be, but at that range with that tight a grouping, it didn't matter. My blast struck one of the skeletons in the back, and it collapsed, vanishing into dust before its stumble could even knock over the one in front of it.

The rest kept going, completely ignoring me in favor of their other prey. If they got to her first and turned on me afterwards, it didn't really make a difference. We'd both be dead all the same.

I took aim again.

*Gandr!*

Another skeleton went down.

*Gandr!*

A third.

*Gandr!*

A fourth.

The other person was still firing back, too, but the crowd of skeletons didn't seem to notice much or care, they just kept advancing. They were like Mastered minions: they didn't know what pain or fear or anger were, they only had the order to seek out and kill, and that was all they cared about.

I panted and took aim again.

Last two shots before I had to rest. My paltry six shot Gandr.

Wasn't like I had any better options. What came after that... I'd figure that out when I got there.

"Save me, Lev!"

My brain stuttered to a halt for a moment. It couldn't be.

*Director?*

How... The Director wasn't supposed to have any Rayshift aptitude. Everyone in Chaldea knew that — a lot of them thought it ironic that the person in charge of the whole thing couldn't have carried out its prime directive if her life depended on it.

I gritted my teeth and took aim again, trying to pick the thinnest spot so I could push through when I ran out of magical energy. I could scratch my head about the Director later —

*CLANG* echoed across the street as a massive cruciform slab slammed into the already battered asphalt and crushed a skeleton. And then it moved, and the figure wielding it swung the sharper edges of its spokes around and into the skeletons with what had to be Brute strength and incredible speed. Pale hair fluttered, and eyes so blue they looked almost purple flashed as they passed me over.

My focus stuttered for a second time.

No way.

"Mash?"

The only thing I could really do was watch as she moved, picking apart the group of skeletons with contemptuous ease. She dodged, she blocked, she swung the edges of that massive shield through their bodies, and one by one, they all vanished into puffs of smoke. I wanted to call it brutal efficiency, but calling it brutal implied something inelegant about it all. What I was seeing just then could only be called graceful. Like watching a prima ballerina dance.

When it was over, Mash turned towards the Director and trotted to stand in front of her.

"Battle concluded," she reported crisply. She didn't even sound winded. "Are you okay, Director?"

"What's going on?" the Director demanded as she pulled herself to her feet.

"I'd kind of like to know that myself," I said as loudly as I could without shouting.

The Director jolted as I walked over to join them, like she hadn't even realized I was there, and Mash turned to me, holding her massive shield like it was a toy.

"Miss Taylor —"

"Hebert!" the Director barked. "There you are! Where's the rest of Team A?"

"Dead, as far as I know," I answered.

"What?" she squawked.

"Whatever happened did catastrophic damage. I didn't see what happened to everyone else, but given the shape the Rayshift chamber was in, I'm not sure they would've survived it. When the emergency Rayshift happened, the system could only find three viable Master candidates. Me —"

I looked behind her at the pair of kids who were peeking out over the ledge of an impressively large section of overturned road. They both jumped, like they'd been caught doing something they shouldn't.

"And those two."

The Director whirled around.

"You!" she shrieked and pointed at them. "The two brats who fell asleep during orientation! I thought I kicked the two of you out!"

"Ah, well," the boy stuttered. He was a scrawny kid who couldn't have been older than seventeen, with messy brown hair and blue eyes and an otherwise vaguely East Asian shape to his face. "You see —"

"Doctor Roman pulled us aside!" the girl declared boldly.

Red hair. So I hadn't been imagining things, then.

"Romani..." the Director muttered, pinching the bridge of her nose. "No, forget about that! How the hell did you two become Masters, is the question! Team A was a carefully selected squad of talented and unique individuals considered peerless in their given fields!" A muscle in my jaw twitched, but I kept my mouth shut. That was quite the vote of confidence. "A pair of country bumpkins shouldn't even have the aptitude for something so exclusive!"

"Please don't misunderstand, Director," said Mash. "Master and...Master did not initiate the contract, I did. The circumstances weren't ideal, so I had to establish it forcefully."

The Director looked at her incredulously.

"You what?"

"Let me explain."

And she did. How she'd been lying, half-crushed beneath a slab of Chaldea's roof that hadn't landed on her quite so gently as the one that had pinned me down. How Ritsuka and Rika (their parents must not have been expecting twins) had found her and stayed, even as the room shut down and everything had started to look rather bleak.

How a Heroic Spirit had reached out to her as the Rayshift was occurring and offered his powers, on the condition that she use them to resolve the cause of the Singularity. Demi-Servant, the Director called it when it came up. A fusion of a Servant and a human being, a halfway state where you could gain the powers of a Heroic Spirit and wield them in combat, without being overcome by the Heroic Spirit's ego.

"And we were Rayshifted here, to Fuyuki, Japan, the year 2004," Mash concluded. "No other Master candidates Rayshifted with us." She blinked and looked to me. "Ah, or so we thought. You and Miss Taylor are the only other humans we've seen so far, but if you're both here, then that must mean the others could be here, too."

"...It's possible, but I don't think it's likely," the Director said thoughtfully.

Mash blinked again.

"Director?"

"Hebert," the Director turned to me instead, "you weren't inside your coffin when you Rayshifted, were you?"

"No," I said. "I was pinned beneath some rubble."

My coffin had been cracked open and I'd fallen out of it, and in the chaos, I hadn't been able to get my bearings fast enough to avoid the collapsing ceiling that had landed on top of me. Not completely.

"I thought so," said the Director. "That means we're the only ones here, in all likelihood. No, I'm certain of it."

"What do you mean?" asked Mash.

The Director swept her hand around the group.

"Each of us here has one thing in common. None of us was inside a coffin when the Rayshift occurred. Rayshifting flesh and blood has a much higher rate of failure, and that's why we have the coffins in the first place, but it's not technically impossible. Everyone else would have been inside their coffins, so they never actually got Rayshifted in the first place. We're here alone."

"I see. That's why you're the Director."

"You're actually pretty reliable when you're calm, Director," Rika said with a smile.

"What's that supposed to mean?" the Director snarled. "Are you saying I'm not usually calm?"

I coughed to hide my smile behind my fist.

“Director,” her brother cut in, “does that mean you weren’t supposed to Rayshift?”

The Director glared at Rika, but dragged her gaze away to address Ritsuka. “Do you think that’s weird? I’m Chaldea’s Director. I’m your commander. The last place I’m supposed to be is getting into the thick of it on the front lines.”

And yet, she was here anyway.

Mash, the twins, and I had all been in the Rayshift chamber. Mash and I because we were supposed to be, the twins because they’d come to try and rescue whoever they could in the wreckage. Whatever the case, we had all been in the room when we were Rayshifted.

Where, exactly, had the Director been? Could she have been caught up in the confusion and unconscious when it all happened? Trapped in the room with us, out cold?

She must’ve been, to be here with us now.

“In any case, our first goal should be to establish a base camp,” I said.

“I know that!” the Director snapped. She turned towards the twins. “Listen up! It’s not ideal, but this is an emergency, so I’ll provisionally approve your contract with Mash and accept you as Masters of Chaldea! That means, from here on out, you follow my orders. Got it?”

“Understood,” said Ritsuka at the same time as his sister snapped to a salute and barked out, “Roger that, Boss!”

The Director let out a miserable sigh, but didn’t comment.

“Okay, then we need to find a Leyline Terminal, a place where magical energy converges. From there, we should be able to establish a connection with Chaldea. In this town’s case, it would probably be…”

Mash coughed pointedly. “Director?”

“What?”

Mash pointed at the road beneath our feet. “It’s right here. This is the Leyline Terminal.”

“What?” And then as she processed the words, the Director’s face turned bright red. “I-I mean, I knew that already! I knew that from the beginning! O-of course I did!”

“The Director is kind of hopeless, isn’t she?” Rika muttered. Her brother dug his elbow into her side.

“Mash, place your shield on the ground!” the Director ordered louder than she really needed to be. “I’m going to set up a summoning circle, using your Noble Phantasm as a catalyst!”

“Understood, Director.”

Carefully, Mash placed her gigantic shield on the clearest patch of asphalt she could find, and the Director set about drawing up and preparing the summoning circle. I watched from the side, arms folded, feeling a little out of my depth but keeping an eagle eye on the whole thing.

Magecraft... Considering I no longer had my powers, I could only wish I had better talent for it. There was only so much two years of frantically cramming everything I could into my head was able to do to bridge the gap between me and even the most average of regular magi.

When it was ready, the Director stood back and nodded. “Okay. Now then, you just have to —”

*Beep-beep*

A chime sounded from Ritsuka’s wrist, and a moment later, a hologram shot up over Mash’s shield, depicting a frazzled Doctor Romani Archaman, facing towards Ritsuka.

“Thank goodness!” he said. “I managed to get the connection back up! Ritsuka, Rika, Mash! The three of you are still okay! I’m so glad.”

“Doctor Roman!” Rika called.

“You managed to secure the connection, good job,” said Romani. “Now, we should be able to communicate properly, even send you rations — eh?”

He looked at me. The hologram swiveled until he was facing me directly. “Taylor? You’re there, too? But then...No, you weren’t in your coffin, either? I guess that explains the flatlined vital signs —”

“Romani!” the Director barked. Romani startled. “Why are you the one sitting in that chair? Where’s Lev?”

“Director, you’re — !”

“*Lev*, Romani. Put him on. He’s the next in line with me trapped here.”

“Uh...” Romani let out a little sigh and briefly closed his eyes. “Professor Lev was in the command room. He was right there when the explosion went off. I’m sorry, Director, but I can’t see how he could have survived it. I thought that you, too... But you’re obviously okay.”

The Director...sort of crumpled. The fire left her face and her posture slackened, and the only thing that came out of her mouth was a quiet croak that might have been an aborted attempt at a “what?”

“Doctor,” I said, stepping up while she recovered, “what’s the state of things? There has to be a dozen other people who should take control before you do.”

“That’s about how many people we have left, actually,” Doctor Romani said grimly. “We’re still picking through and checking everywhere we can, but we’re down to a crew of about twenty. The reason I’m in charge right now is that there isn’t anyone else more qualified to take the position.”

A tremor went through my belly and my mouth worked as I tried to wrap my head around that. A staff of over two-hundred people, and in the span of a single attack, almost all of them had died?

Just who or what had attacked Chaldea that they could kill that many people that quickly?

“Twenty?” the Director breathed. “What about — the Master candidates. What condition are they in?”

“Critical, all forty-seven... ah, that is, all forty-six of them. We’re short on both medical staff and supplies, so even if we let the worst off go, we might not be able to save that many of them —”

“You call yourself a doctor?” the Director demanded. “The coffins all have in-built cryopreservation functions! You can worry about resuscitating them all later. For now, your top priority is to save as many lives as you possibly can!”

Romani’s mouth fell open and his eyes went wide, and then he slapped a hand to his forehead.

“Ah — right, I’m so stupid! I can’t believe I forgot about that!” Immediately, he leapt out of his chair, and his voice called back towards us, “I’ll get on that right away! Please wait!”

The hologram of an empty chair not hovered in the air in front of us.

“I’m a bit surprised, Director,” Mash commented quietly. “Cryopreservation without consent is a violation of international human rights, and yet you committed to it without a second thought.”

“I can worry about something so meaningless later,” the Director said. “Making sure they all survive is the most important thing.”

In spite of the way she said it, though, her brow was furrowed and the line of her mouth was nervous. Times like these were when I remembered exactly how young she was, barely a year older than me, and exactly how much she’d taken on her shoulders in spite of that.

Maybe I didn’t have the most unbiased perspective on that, though.

In the uneasy silence that followed, I stepped up next to the Director. I didn’t say anything, but she glanced in my direction, and then some of the tension in her shoulders eased just a little bit.

A few minutes later, Romani returned to his seat and slumped against the backrest with a sigh. “It’s done. The remaining Master candidates have been put into cryopreservation, pending an attempt to resuscitate them at a later date.”

“Good.” The Director nodded. “What’s the state of the rest of Chaldea?”

Romani sighed again. “We’ve lost about eighty percent functionality. We’re doing the best we can with just twenty people on hand, but as it is, there’s only so much we can handle, and we’re already relying on the backup generators to keep things running. Right now, we’re focusing on getting the Rayshift functionality repaired and maintaining Chaldeas itself and the SHEBA lens. Without external communications, that’s the best we can do.”

The Director’s lips pursed, but she nodded.

“That’s good. It’s exactly what I would be doing right now in your place. Make Rayshifting your top priority. We need you to be able to recall us, so we can send another team to handle the situation. I’m going to have Hebert attempt a summoning using Mash’s shield, but if we run into higher tier enemies than the fodder we’ve seen so far, our current setup won’t cut it.”

A jolt of apprehension shot through my stomach, but I did my best not to let it show.

“In the meantime,” the Director went on, “we’ll investigate the cause of this Singularity’s formation.”

“Is that a good idea?” Romani asked worriedly. “Even with a Servant and a Demi-Servant, it could be dangerous. We originally intended to send an entire team, after all. And that’s assuming the summoning system works properly at all, considering we’ve only successfully completed three summonings in its lifespan.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said the Director. “Even if we only had Mash, a Demi-Servant should be enough to handle the sort of low level monsters we’ve encountered so far. Besides, I have no intention of attempting to resolve this Singularity with just what we have here. Having said that, it’s going to take time for you to complete repairs, and there’s no sense in us standing here waiting while you do.”

“You *do* technically have two members of Team A with you,” Romani said thoughtfully. “Mash, Ritsuka, Rika, I know this is a lot to ask of you three, but do you think you can handle this?”

“It’s fine, Doctor,” said Mash.

“We’ll have this thing all wrapped up before you know it!” Rika added. Ritsuka gave a confident nod, and if Romani noticed the clenched fists and shaking hands, he didn’t comment on it.

He turned towards me.

“Taylor…”

“It’s literally what I signed up for,” I told him.

He sighed. “Just don’t push yourself. And if your arm starts to bother you —”

“It hasn’t,” I cut him off. He seemed to take the hint.

“I can’t do much from here, but I’m rooting for all of you. Director, best of luck. If an emergency crops up, please contact me.”

The Director let out a huff, but didn’t comment. The connection cut and Romani’s hologram vanished. We were alone, again.

“Director, are you sure this is the right decision?” Mash asked. “We could just wait here for rescue.”

“If we did that, I’d never hear the end of it from the Association,” the Director said. “Worse, they might decide this whole thing was my fault for mismanaging the situation and take Chaldea from me.”

Like hell I'm letting a bunch of stuck up busybodies take my father's dream away! We're not going back empty-handed!"

"This isn't the best place to stand, either," I added. "Sitting in the open is just asking for us to get attacked again."

The Director nodded. "Right. We can't stay here no matter what, so we might as well start investigating so that this whole mess isn't a total loss. Before all of that, though..."

She turned to me.

"I know this wasn't exactly how we told you it would happen, but you're going to summon a Servant."