

Chapter VI: A Brief Respite

A long moment of silence stretched out between us all as the final bits of Medusa vanished and the heat of Caster's attack began to die down. Only when it became obvious that she was well and truly gone and wouldn't spring out of the ground to land a devastating surprise attack did Mash finally relax, sagging a little as she let out a long, weary sigh.

Caster, too, relaxed, smirking a little as he slung his staff across his shoulders and rested his arms atop it.

"Well," he said with a touch of smugness. "Finally got rid of that bitch."

That seemed to be the stroke that broke the dam, because behind me, the Director let out a relieved sigh of her own, even as Rika cheered.

"Ding-dong, the Wicked Witch is dead!"

"Seriously," the Director groused, "you grew up in Japan. How do you know all of these references?"

"I'm glad we all made it through that," Ritsuka said with a smile. "I was a little worried for a while, there."

"Mash, you were great!" Rika jabbered enthusiastically. "And Caster! Caster! That fire tornado at the end, that was so awesome! Like, wow, what kind of magic was that?"

"Rune magic," Caster answered with the patient satisfaction of a man used to receiving praise. "A little something I learned from my teacher. It's not the way I like to do things, but it got the job done, wouldn't you say, Little Missy?"

"Boy, did it ever!"

"Now what?"

The cheering and celebrations stopped and everyone turned to me.

After a moment, it was the Director who replied. "We need to get to the Second Owner's house and continue our investigation."

"I meant for you, Caster," I said. "What are you going to do, now that we've beaten Medusa?"

Does our partnership end here?

Caster hummed thoughtfully, stroking his chin. "You guys said you're with some group called Chaldea, right? You're here to investigate why this Grail War went so far off course?"

"Th-that's right!" the Director said. "We're the Chaldea Security Organization, and we're here to correct the historical irregularities that caused this Grail War to deviate from proper human history!"

“Director,” I rebuked her. Startled, she looked towards me, like she didn’t know why I was scolding her.

Sometimes, it was all too easy to forget that she was a very young woman trying to fill very big shoes.

“Correct historical irregularities, eh?” Caster mused. “Well, I don’t really know anything about that sort of thing, so the way I see it, there’s a Grail War in need of winning, and I intend to see my new Master across the finish line.”

Of course.

Because he was a Servant summoned by the Grail into this Holy Grail War, it was only natural that his only motivation was to complete the Grail War and get his wish. It wasn’t in any way a surprise, and I’d honestly been expecting it.

“So you can make your wish, even if someone messing with the Grail winds up being the reason this all happened in the first place?”

“Miss Taylor,” Mash started. “We don’t yet know that the Grail is the cause for this Singularity.”

We don’t know that it isn’t, I didn’t say. I just kept staring straight into Caster’s blood red eyes.

“Heh.” Caster grinned at me. “Sorry to disappoint. Or maybe I should say, sorry I don’t live down to those expectations of yours? I don’t have a wish for the Grail.”

“You don’t?” the Director echoed incredulously.

“*Everyone* has a wish for the Grail,” I said quietly.

Even me.

Even if what I felt towards the path I took wasn’t quite the same as regret, the idea of having a second chance to do things over, to do them *better*, was appealing in a way that would have been far too tempting to a younger me.

“Unlike the rest of this rabble, I didn’t come here to get a second chance at life or undo some mistake I made while I was alive.” Caster’s grin took on edges. “I just figured, how many chances was I gonna get to duke it out with some of the greatest heroes in all of history? A good fight against a bunch of strong enemies...I couldn’t resist.”

My brow furrowed.

“That’s it? You’re here...because it sounded like fun?”

Seriously? Just which Heroic Spirit was this, that he was more interested in duking it out with other heroes than making a wish on an omnipotent wish-granting device? When tragic deaths and terrible twists of fate were so common in myth and legend, who had lived so well in spite of those that he was content just to have a good time while it lasted?

“That does sound a little unbelievable,” the Director said skeptically. “A Servant answering the call for the Holy Grail War, but not having a wish he wants fulfilled? Wouldn’t the Grail choose a Heroic Spirit with a stronger motivation than that? As a Caster, to boot!”

Beep-beep!

“I finally managed to reestablish a connection!” Romani said as he reappeared. “Director, there’s a Servant —”

He choked off as he saw Caster.

“— right on top of you,” he finished meekly.

“Oh?”

Caster stepped towards him, rubbing at his chin as he examined Romani’s projected image. “This is... Some form of communication through magecraft? Pretty slick setup.”

“A-ah, yes, I mean...” Romani cleared his throat. “Forgive me. I-I don’t know which Heroic Spirit you are, but I would like to humbly extend my gratitude —”

“Romani,” the Director said irritably, “stop trying to kiss his ass.”

“D-Director!”

Rika giggled, the way little girls did the first time they heard their mothers swear.

“You can leave out all of that formal bullshit,” Caster agreed, waving a hand as though to ward away an unpleasant smell. “Get straight to the point.”

“R-right.” Romani looked dismayed. “A-ah. Ahem. First off, can I confirm that you’re a Servant of this local Holy Grail War? Or what it was *supposed* to be, in any case?”

“We’ve already established that,” the Director told him flatly. “He’s a Caster class Servant, although he hasn’t shared his true name, yet. He helped us defeat a Lancer class Servant, true name Medusa.”

Romani choked. “M-Medusa? And you’re all okay?”

“Everything’s fine, Doctor Roman!” Rika said brightly, waving at him. Romani gave a sigh of relief and turned to something on the monitors he was sitting in front of.

“Rika, Ritsuka, Mash, yes, your vitals are all good,” he said. “Director, I haven’t been able to get a good read on you, but if you’re well enough to scold me —”

“*Romani*,” she growled threateningly.

“— a-and Taylor, you’re showing some strain, but it’s all within acceptable tolerances, so I’m not too worried about that.”

Strain. From supporting Caster, no doubt. It wasn't too bad, although I could definitely notice the dip in my own energy. A constant pulling sensation that felt like it was attached to some place inside of me that was impossible to describe, a place that was both in my body and yet beyond it. The fight with Medusa had been pretty quick, but I got the feeling... If Caster got into three more fights of that length and intensity, I could handle that, but only barely.

I cast him a surreptitious glance. He looked none the worse for wear. He didn't even seem to be breathing hard, although how much Servants even *needed* to breathe, I didn't really know for sure.

"That said," Romani went on. "Caster. If you and Lancer were both participants of this Holy Grail War... Are you aware of the circumstances of the other five Servants?"

Caster hummed and crossed his arms. "This whole mess has been a shitshow for quite a while. Saber is the one guarding the Grail. She defeated the others and did something that converted them into these... caricatures, like you saw with Lancer. Lancer, Archer, Rider, Assassin, Berserker, they were all beaten one by one and transformed into these monsters. Corrupted, I guess you could say."

"Do you know how this all started?" I asked.

Caster shrugged.

"Not the first clue, Princess."

"Princess?" Romani squawked. We both ignored him.

"One day," said Caster, "everything just changed. Masters disappeared, the whole city caught fire, and every living human just vanished. *Poof*. Saber started things back up again, not long after. I'm the only one she never actually beat."

"Which means the only way for the Grail War to end —"

"— is for me or her to kick the bucket," Caster confirmed. "That's why the others have been on my tail this whole time. I'm the last Servant standing in the way of Saber's victory."

"And the others?" Romani asked.

"I've already beaten Rider and Assassin, and we just took out Lancer. Berserker... That thing's off rampaging on its own, somewhere in the forest. The only ones left we really have to worry about are Archer and Saber."

"Have you fought either of them before?"

"Heh!" Caster grinned. "Enough to know that I can't take them both on, and Saber's just beyond me by myself. If I had been summoned as a Lancer, maybe. Unfortunately, that copycat bastard rarely strays too far from Saber's side, and even when he does, he only ventures far enough to keep her hideaway in clear view, so he can catch me if I even think about heading that way."

"Hideaway?" Ritsuka parroted. "You said she was guarding the Grail, so does that mean... U-um, Director, what was it you said about the Grail manifesting?"

The Director grunted. “I said there were four places in this city where it could manifest. We’ve already checked out two of them, and the way Caster is talking about Archer, I doubt it’ll be at the third, which means...” She looked at Caster. “She’s hiding on the mountain?”

Caster grinned. “You figured it out, huh? Pretty slick. Yeah, there’s a cavern in the mountain where the Grail is kept. Saber is down there, but Archer guards the entrance. I’ve been avoiding going up there and confronting him, because Saber might decide to pop up and double team me, and I know better than to get into that kind of fight when that much firepower is being slung around.”

“Does that mean you know who Saber is?” I asked.

Caster’s grin dimmed and fell into a frown. “King Arthur,” he said solemnly.

The Director recoiled like she’d been slapped, Mash’s mouth fell open, and even the twins looked utterly gobsmacked. I guess a legend that famous was known even in far off places like Japan.

“Wh-wh-what?” Romani shrieked.

Even I wasn’t unaffected by the news, although I liked to think my reaction was much less extreme and much more muted than the others’ were.

King Arthur...

My understanding of Heroic Spirits was that age and fame equated to larger degrees of power. The older and more celebrated a legend was, the more people recognized the name and deeds of a hero from that legend, the stronger they were and the more they had to bring to bear. Medusa probably would have been a good example, if she’d been summoned as a Rider, with maybe Pegasus as her mount and probably something reflecting the island she’d been exiled to. As a Lancer? Even her fame hadn’t been able to make up for the limits of her class.

King Arthur as a Saber?

“Which means her sword is Excalibur,” I said. In spite of myself, my voice sounded a little faint to my ears.

Wait.

“Her?”

Caster shrugged. “The myths and legends don’t always get things right,” he said, like that explained *anything*, “and they don’t always know all of the important bits.”

“Seems like a pretty big oversight.”

“Who cares about her gender?” the Director demanded hysterically. “We’re going up against the most famous knight in history! Wielding the greatest holy sword ever made! I think that’s a little more important than whether or not she was a woman hiding her gender!”

A fair point. Maybe I was a little more shaken by the news of who our final enemy was than I'd originally thought.

"Director!" Romani shouted. "You can't tell me you're actually intending to face him! H-her! King Arthur, I mean! E-even with Caster's help, there's no way Mash could possibly face someone that strong!"

"The useless weakling does have a bit of a point," Caster said, humming.

Romani sputtered, "W-weakling —"

Caster poked at Mash's shield.

"You can't even use your Noble Phantasm, can you?"

Mash's mouth twisted into a miserable line and she looked away. "N-no," she admitted. "I can't."

Caster made a noise of understanding.

"I thought so. It's not the end of the world, but it does put us in a bit of a bind."

"What did I do to deserve this?" the Director moaned. "King Arthur, Excalibur — Lev, why did this have to happen to me? Why did something like this have to happen on my watch, to my Chaldea?" She clutched at her hair as though to tear it all out of her scalp. "What am I going to do? What am I going to do, Lev? I-I can't handle something like this! I just can't! This was never supposed to happen! I'm going to die here in this miserable city before I ever even got —"

The resounding smack of my hand hitting her cheek shocked her into silence.

"Whoa," said Rika.

"M-Miss Taylor!" Mash gasped.

"Taylor! What are you thinking?" Romani said, aghast. "D-Director, are you okay?"

"Get ahold of yourself," I told the Director, I told *Olga Marie Animosphere*. "You're the Director of Chaldea, aren't you? It's your job to be calm and in control, no matter the situation, because everyone under you is looking to you for direction. You don't crack, you don't break down, you don't panic, you keep cool and *lead*."

I stepped closer, and quieter, so that only she could hear, I told her, "I know you can do this, Marie. I *know* you can. You just have to believe that you can."

Caster chuckled, folding his arms across his chest. "Well now. You know, I have to admit, I'm kinda jealous, Master. Usually, I'm the one helping to calm down hysterical women."

Briefly, I closed my eyes and projected my mind at him. *Not helping, Caster.*

I don't know, Master, Caster replied, a little humor can go a pretty long way in making even hopeless situations less grim.

The Director took a deep, calming breath, and at length, in a quiet, strong voice, she said, “Romani.”

“Y-yes, Director?”

“Have you managed to get into contact with anyone from outside of Chaldea, yet? The UN? The Mage’s Association?”

Romani grimaced and let out a long sigh, running his hand over his head.

“I’m afraid not, Director. We’ve managed to repair at least a part of our communications apparatus, but we haven’t been able to reach anyone outside, yet.”

“And the Masters in cryopreservation? Will any of them make a recovery in a reasonable timeframe?”

“...No. With things as they are, we can’t even expect to begin treatment of their injuries for probably several weeks, at the soonest. Ritsuka, Rika, and Taylor are all we currently have, in terms of Masters, and since Da Vinci can’t leave base, Mash is our only Servant.”

Which meant the backup we had been trying to hold out for probably wasn’t coming.

I wanted to be surprised, but if I was being completely honest, it was basically what I’d been expecting from the beginning. In terms of my career, this was how things had shaken out far too often.

“D-does Mash even need a Noble Phantasm?” Rika asked. “She did pretty good without it against Medusa!”

“If Caster hadn’t shown up to help, though,” Ritsuka mumbled.

“Weren’t you listening before?” the Director asked, some of the fire returning to her voice. “A battle between Servants can be said to be a battle between Noble Phantasms. Against Medusa, it might not have mattered quite so much, because as a Lancer, her Noble Phantasm was limited in scope. King Arthur’s Excalibur is going to be on a completely different level.”

“Well, there might be something we can do about that,” Caster said. “Girlie, you’re pretty new to being a Servant, right?”

Mash nodded. “I’m a Demi-Servant. Ah, that is, through a form of possession, I’m a human fused with a Servant, although I’m afraid the Servant who fused with me didn’t tell me his name or teach me any of his skills.”

Caster made another noise of understanding. “Can’t say I’ve ever heard of that happening before, but it sounds similar to the sorts of things you’d hear about old shamans and the druids. Well, it’s not an easy problem to handle, but it’s not unfixable, either.”

“In the meantime, we need to find the Second Owner’s house,” said the Director. “If we can’t expect any backup...th-then we’ll just have to handle this ourselves.”

“D-Director...!”

“We don’t have a choice, Romani!” she snapped at him. “Proper history needs to be restored, no matter what! If we’re the only ones who can do it, right now... Then we just have to be the ones to do it!”

“Nice.” Caster grinned. “That’s a good attitude to have, Boss Lady. Looks like you have something of a spine in you, after all.”

The Director huffed. “I’m not even going to dignify that with a response!”

Isn't that what you just did?

“We should get moving,” I said instead. “We’ve already been out for quite a while, so we should find the Second Owner’s house and get some rest, before we head up the mountain.”

“Hold on a second!” said Romani. “Taylor, I’m sure you’re more familiar with this kind of situation, and Director, I realize we don’t have much in the way of options, but there’s no way Mash, Rika, and Ritsuka are ready for this! Especially Ritsuka and Rika! E-even if you managed to defeat Lancer, a legend like King Arthur is on a completely different level!”

“This Singularity isn’t going to wait for us to be ready, Romani,” I told him. “Our resources are limited, our supplies are limited, and that means our time is limited. If we tried to wait it out for a relief team that doesn’t look like it’ll be coming, then all that’ll happen is that we’ll be tired, hungry, and weak when we no longer have a choice *but* to handle this ourselves.”

“Still...!”

“We’ll be fine, Doctor Roman,” said Rika a little *too* brightly. “After all, we’ve got Mash!”

“Master,” Mash mumbled worriedly.

And Romani...deflated.

“I can’t stop you,” he admitted miserably. “If you think this is the best course of action, then the only thing I can do is make sure you’re as provisioned as I possibly can. Contact me when you’ve settled in at the Second Owner’s house. I’ll send you some rations to help hold you over.”

Without another word, his image flickered and vanished. For a moment, a dark pall settled over us and silence echoed through the group.

“The Second Owner’s house is in the southern end of the residential district,” the Director said at length. “We should notice it as we get closer...but I wouldn’t be surprised if there were more skeletons hanging around it when we get there.”

“I’ll lead the way,” Mash said strongly.

I turned to my own Servant, temporary as he might be. “Caster.”

“Roger that, Master.” Caster gave me a lazy salute. “I’ll bring up the rear and make sure we don’t get ambushed.”

That wasn't what I was going to say, I wanted to tell him, but I pursed my lips and kept quiet. He'd been helpful so far, so I guess I could extend him that much trust. All things considered... If Caster wanted us dead now, he could have done it from the beginning. The time to watch for him would be when we made it to the Grail and beat Saber.

I didn't intend on letting him bring up the rear *then*.

In a kind of diamond formation, with us squishy humans in the middle and Mash and Caster forming the top and bottom, we turned down the main road and wound our way through the streets towards the Second Owner's house. The Director led, in a roundabout fashion, pointing out when we needed to make a turn and when to keep going straight, although I got the feeling that, strictly speaking, we weren't taking the most direct route and it was really more of a slow meander.

Well, there was a difference between seeing a map and walking the route yourself. It made me miss my bugs, though; I'd gotten used to not having the sort of absolute proprioception I'd had as a cape, but there were plenty of times where it would have been very convenient to still have that absolute sense of where I was and what was around me, even in the antarctic.

It might not have done me much good, here. Chaldea was probably too cold and too remote to host anything like as thriving an insect population as Brockton Bay or Chicago, but Fuyuki City on fire would have had the exact opposite problem, since everything being on fire would likely have killed off all but a sparse few of the hardier species.

At the end of it, we took maybe another twenty minutes of walking to reach the Second Owner's house, although calling it just a house might have been something of a misnomer. I wasn't sure "mansion" quite fit, because by the standards of some of America's mansions, it was absolutely tiny, but if I compared it to the more modest homes that had burned down, the almost entirely intact building could be called palatial.

It stretched up two stories, a thing of brick and wood that looked like it belonged in Victorian London instead of modern Japan, with dark paneling on the outside and a sloped roof, complete with chimney. It towered over the other residences around it, bigger and more expansive, with a larger plot of land to sit on to boot.

Surrounded by smaller, more compact suburban homes with mid-century designs, it stood out, in more ways than one.

"Whoa," Rika said when she saw it. "The Second Owner must've been loaded."

"For what it's worth, out here," the Director said dismissively. "The position of Second Owner is somewhat prestigious, yes, but in terms of how much clout it gets you in the Association, location *does* matter. Being the Second Owner of a place as backwater as this is like being the mayor of a sleepy hamlet out in the countryside and will net you about as much fame."

"Harsh," Rika said with a grin.

"Does the Mage's Association really look down on Japan that much?" Ritsuka asked.

“It’s like I already told you,” said the Director. “Japan has notoriously poor spiritual grounds, and as a result, what magi do spring up here tend to be lackluster and third rate. The Association only keeps a token presence here and leaves most of the administration to the handful of Second Owners in charge of its few hotspots.” She looked up at the house. “If I remember right, most of this Second Owner’s wealth and influence comes from the patents their family owns. It’s a bit surprising, considering how young their bloodline actually is.”

I wished that kind of classism didn’t make sense. But one of the things I’d learned studying with the Director and the likes of Wodime was that age equaled power, for magi. The older and longer your lineage, the more impressive and robust your magic was. The only way to get around that was to be born with a really special attribute or innate ability, and if you *were* you’d better hope you weren’t special enough to get the attention of someone who wanted to find out how and why.

Luckily and unluckily, I was barely average, in terms of potential. I wasn’t a rising star, but I wasn’t stuck somewhere in some nutjob’s secret lab with my head in one jar and all of my organs in others, still somehow alive.

I’d come close enough to that with Bonesaw.

“It looks like the house is in good shape,” I commented. “A few broken windows... The upper floor might be a bit unsafe, but if it’s stayed standing this long, we shouldn’t have any trouble.”

“The bounded field looks like it’s been put through the wringer, too,” Caster chimed in. “It’s not totally gone, but we shouldn’t have to worry about being forcibly ejected or anything, just some mild discomfort on the way in.”

“Lucky us,” said the Director.

“I can’t wait to get inside,” Rika groaned. “My feet are killing me.”

“I wouldn’t mind sitting down for a while,” her brother agreed.

One by one, we filed through the front gate, and then the front door, and although the twins shivered as the chill of the bounded field pressed down on us like some distant, disapproving eye, we made it through unaccosted and entered the house to find it marvelously intact, like it hadn’t been touched at all by the fires raging outside. There wasn’t even a layer of soot from the smoke billowing up from the rest of the city.

“The bounded field did a remarkable job keeping this place in good shape,” the Director allowed with a kind of grudging respect.

She stepped up from the small well at the front door and onto the not-quite-pristine wooden floors — polished and cared for, but untended for who knew how long. I followed behind her.

“Um!” Mash interjected anxiously.

The Director and I turned around.

“What is it, Mash?”

“In Japan, isn’t it customary to remove your shoes at the door, so that you don’t track dirt through the house?” she asked, looking pointedly at our feet. I glanced down and noticed the Director doing the same out of the corner of my eye; a trail of dirty footprints led across the floorboards to us.

The Director and I shared a glance.

“Now isn’t the time to be observing social norms and paying our respects to the home owners, Mash,” I told her. “If we need to leave in a hurry, we won’t have time to bother getting our shoes back on.”

“I’m sure the old residents would understand that the situation changes things,” the Director added. “Hebert’s right. If we need to leave in a hurry, we won’t have the chance to grab our shoes, so it’s better to just leave them on.”

Ritsuka and Rika, who’d been about to start tugging their shoes off, froze, and then abandoned the task.

“This feels a little weird,” Rika commented under her breath. I still heard her clearly.

“You’re telling me,” Ritsuka muttered back at her.

We made our way into the living room, where the plush, expensive furniture was just as intact as the rest of the house. Ritsuka and Rika made a beeline for the couch and they both collapsed onto it with a muted *whump*, sighing as they sagged into the cushions. The Director and I chose two of the armchairs instead, while Mash awkwardly propped her shield up against the wall and gingerly took a seat in one of the spare table chairs. Caster stayed standing. They were the only ones who didn’t seem at all tired.

“Haaa,” Rika breathed, slumped. “It feels like we were walking for *days*.”

“It must’ve been almost six hours,” Ritsuka agreed tiredly.

“...It hasn’t been that long,” the Director said thoughtfully, “but come to think of it... Was there any change in the cloud cover that entire time?”

“If there was, I didn’t notice it,” I told her.

“So we have no idea what time it is or exactly how long we’ve been here. Or if there are any unusual weather patterns, like it constantly being night.”

I glanced over at the clock on the mantle above the fireplace, but it had long ago stopped working, so there wasn’t any point. A good enough Thinker might have been able to discern how long things had been this way by how long ago it had stopped, but we were fresh out of those.

“The sky’s been covered ever since the fires started,” Caster chimed in. “Sorry, Boss Lady. Days start to slip together, after a while, so I couldn’t tell you how long ago this all happened.”

The Director grunted again. “We need to contact Romani.”

Rika and Ritsuka groaned, but eventually, Ritsuka pulled himself up, slid the sleeve of his Chaldea uniform up, and activated the comms device on his wrist.

Beep-beep

The image of Romani Archaman flickered into existence in midair, and he blinked at us, sandwich in hand and mouth full. My stomach rumbled, and it was joined a moment later by the twins’.

As soon as he realized what was happening, Romani swiftly chewed his food and set the sandwich down out of sight of the camera, then took a quick gulp of whatever he was drinking.

“Sorry about that,” he apologized immediately. “You found the Second Owner’s house sooner than I was expecting you to, so I went to grab a bite to eat.”

“How selfish of you, Romani,” the Director said darkly.

“H-hey! I’ve been trying to keep an eye on you guys and manage the repairs for all of the vital systems for almost eight hours, now! I can only go so long before I succumb to basic human needs, you know!”

Rika thrust one finger into the air. “We’ve got a couple of those to take care of ourselves, Doctor Roman!”

“She’s right,” said the Director, although she didn’t sound entirely happy to be saying it. “We need those rations yesterday, Romani. Don’t tell me you didn’t get any ready.”

“I’ve got it all set up, actually,” said Romani. “We’ve managed to get that much fixed, at least. I just need Mash to establish a summoning circle for us to use to connect with, and I can send you as much food and water as you can carry.”

“Good,” said the Director. “I didn’t want to try trusting whatever is left in this place’s kitchen, so even the tasteless MRE bars in those ration packs are of more use to us.” She waved a hand in the general direction of the floor. “Mash!”

“Yes, Director!”

Mash bounded out of her chair and went over to pick up her shield, and then she set it down on the clearest patch of floor she could find, facing up. An instant later, the pattern of a magic circle inscribed itself in the air over top of it, glowing brightly.

“Got it!” said Romani. “Connection...good. Rayshift procedure...cleared. You should get your supplies in three, two, one...”

With a flash, the magic circle vanished, and in its place was a collection of cans, boxes, and plastic bottles of water, all neatly stacked and somehow balanced. The boxes were labeled in big, stenciled lettering: RATIONS.

Caster let out a low whistle.

“Rayshift successful, Doctor Roman,” Mash reported.

“That’s great.” Romani smiled. “There should be enough there for two meals for each of you, plus a few snacks for quick bursts of energy. Please contact me again if you need anything more.”

The Director appraised the stack of rations and bottled water and gave an approving nod. “Good work, Romani.”

Romani let out a self-deprecating laugh. “Good to know I can be counted on to not screw up at least this much.”

“Do you have the local time?” I asked him suddenly.

“Oh! Uh...”

Romani looked at something on his monitors.

“The readings say...it’s a little after midnight.”

I nodded and turned to the Director. “We should get some sleep, once we’ve eaten. We’ll head for the mountain tomorrow morning, after breakfast, when everyone’s had a chance to regain some energy.”

I glanced pointedly at the twins, who looked like they were ready to fall asleep right then and there, and who most certainly weren’t ready to hike up a mountain, right now.

“I agree,” she said, and then she looked to Romani. “Romani, make sure you get some sleep yourself. As long as the Rayshift is functioning properly, we can worry about the other systems later, and we need you at the top of your game when we go to take out Saber, in case we have to make an emergency escape. There’s no telling how quickly this Singularity will collapse.”

Romani laughed again, like he’d been told off and ordered around so much that he’d gotten used to it. “Roger that, Director.”

The instant he was gone, the Director and I set upon the rations and started sorting them out with Mash’s help. Some of them were flavorless, tasteless MRE bars, the kind high in energy but which were like chewing mud, and we set those aside for later, in case we needed the boost tomorrow. Some of them, though, were dehydrated meals, complete with instructions on how to prepare them.

“Good thing Romani sent us lots of water,” I muttered. “I’m not sure I want to trust the pipes around here.”

“Probably a good idea,” the Director agreed.

The twins had nodded off at some point, snoring lightly, with Rika’s head resting on Ritsuka’s shoulder, and somehow, I managed to convince the Director to leave them be as we found the kitchen and started the process of rehydrating our food. A quick thing, it turned out. Once we got the pots and pans and got the water to boiling, it only took about ten minutes.

The Director went to rouse the twins while I got plates and silverware out for everyone, and together, we sat on the floor around the coffee table in the living room and quietly ate. Even Rika was uncharacteristically subdued — she looked like she was barely keeping her eyes open as she shoveled strips of chicken into her mouth like she wasn't even tasting them.

There didn't seem to be any point in washing dishes that weren't ever going to be used again, so we just stacked them up in the kitchen sink, and Mash quietly led Rika and Ritsuka upstairs to find a bed to sleep in. Even she seemed to finally be feeling the fatigue, although she was handling it much better than the twins did.

When she came back downstairs, I announced, "We're going to need to organize shifts."

The Director looked like I'd just told her she was going to have to run all the way back to the church.

"The Director can take the last shift in the morning," I said, taking pity on her. "Caster, can you —"

Caster waved me off. "Don't worry about it, Master. Servants don't need to sleep, so I'll keep watch the entire night. The rest of you can get a full night's sleep."

I wanted to be suspicious, but at that point, even I was getting too tired to put up a fight about it. Mash tried to hide a yawn behind one hand.

"We'll leave keeping watch to you, then," I agreed.

"Thank God," the Director mumbled.

"In terms of defenses, though," I went on, "do you think you can fix the bounded field?"

Caster grinned. "I'll do you one better," he told me. "I'll upgrade it, while I'm at it. If that copycat bastard can get through it when I'm done with it, he'll deserve to have managed it."

Not...*exactly* what I wanted to hear, but probably as good as I was going to get.

"Alright," I said. "We'll leave you to it, then."

With that taken care of, Mash, the Director, and I headed upstairs. Mash, quietly, pointed out where the bedrooms were, then the room where the twins were sharing a bed and went to join them. I guess, as their Servant, she wanted to stay as close to them as possible, and I couldn't fault that. The Director just marched towards the closest one and went in without pomp or ceremony, and that left me to pick the last one.

Red carpeting stretched across the floor as I entered, with dark wood furniture and paneling on the walls that gave it a kind of elegant, old fashioned feel. Three windows were set into the walls, two on one side and one on the other, with canary yellow floral print curtains, and a comfortably large four poster bed sat in the middle, adorned with similar sheets. A mirror hung above a small vanity between two of the windows, and next to the third sat a chest of drawers. In one corner was a small table and two chairs, and with a jolt, I realized there was a cup of unfinished tea sitting there, leftover from this room's last occupant.

Suddenly, I was aware that there had been another person here, once, living in this room and sleeping in this bed, another person with a life, dreams, goals, ambitions, a family. Someone who hadn't planned on dying and hadn't known she wouldn't be returning when she left. I felt like an intruder, stepping over her grave.

I took in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

There was nothing I could do for her, now. The only thing I could do was to fix this Singularity and make sure her death hadn't gone unanswered.

That conviction was still burning in my gut after I'd slipped my shoes off and crawled in between her sheets. Tomorrow, I was going to go and get her justice.

I could still smell her perfume on her pillow.