

Chapter CXLVI: Legacy of a Checkered Past

Lunch was eaten with much enthusiasm and enjoyed by everyone involved. Renée was the only one unhappy with it, because she wasn't the one who made it, and if Emiya was just a little bit smug, anyone who noticed it was wise enough not to comment on it and worsen her mood.

The one who seemed most excited was Jackie, who ate just about everything that was put in front of her like she had never had a proper meal before, and aside from what she'd had so far with us, she probably hadn't. The only comparison I could make to how she must have grown up was the orphans and the kids I'd taken responsibility for after Leviathan, left alone and destitute with no reliable source of any food, let alone something as rich as Emiya's usual cooking.

Maybe, unlike those kids, she hadn't had anyone to take her in. Andersen had said her suffering was a thing of the past, something I couldn't change, so maybe he knew even better than I did what she'd had to deal with and how it had killed her young enough to render her forever a child.

A part of me wanted to ask, but another part loathed the idea and dreaded having to put up with whatever condescending remark he might have to make in the process, like suggesting that I had gotten in over my head because of my own trauma. The more practical side of me won, just as a matter of the fact that it would probably be better to ask Jackie herself instead of going behind her back. Frankly, I wasn't sure she would be all that emotionally tangled in giving a response.

I imagined she might deliver her whole life story as a matter of fact. Like it had happened and it was all over with, so what did it even matter anymore? I could even relate to that; the bullying had been terrible and awful when it was happening, but looking back on it now, it felt like it had happened to someone else entirely, as though fifteen-year-old Taylor Hebert was some strange and fantastical creature, and somewhere between that ill-fated bank robbery and the moment I pulled the trigger and killed Coil, she had simply ceased to exist. I was what had crawled out of her remains like a moth from a cocoon.

I shelved it for later, when there could be a private moment away from everyone, and decided instead to simply enjoy the food and pretend I had any idea whatsoever about how to be her mother.

Once we'd all had our fill and there was nothing left but crumbs, as Emiya and Renée carried off the plates and utensils to be washed, the rest of us eventually found our way back to the study and the map contained therein. Displayed on it was a collection of dots clustered in a single building — us — and a smattering of other dots representing the enemy patrols.

In the time since they'd all initially been marked with a tracker, they had obviously moved and spread out across the city. There were, of course, entire swathes of the city that were completely barren of any sign of them, but as for the rest, they had all gone to different sections, and there didn't seem to be much mixing between them.

A thought occurred to me then, and I stared down at the moving dots as though they could answer me: did these Helter Skelter even need maintenance, or were they completely, fully autonomous?

Presumably, if they needed repairing and refueling at any point, then they would have to return to their creator for an oil change and a tuneup, so to speak, and when that happened, we should be able to track them back to him. If they were completely independent, however, and were left to go until they couldn't anymore? Then we were back to square one.

I'd been operating under the assumption that these things were all disposable. That — unlike any of the Tinkers I'd known throughout my career — if their creator cared about them at all, it was for their utility as a distraction and their ability to gather information, considering how many there were clomping around the streets. I should have thought of it earlier, that simply because they were mass-producible didn't mean their creator wouldn't be attached to them or need to put in extra work to keep them going.

Unfortunately, without context, any point on this map was the same as any other. Even tracking them to see if they visited any common points separately or together would only give us a direction to look and not much more.

“Let's go over what we have so far,” I said to the group.

Rika perked up. “Oh, are we doing a recap episode? I usually sleep through those or skip ‘em!”

Her brother gave her an exasperated look and a sharp poke in the side, and she squeaked and squirmed away from him. Having gotten used to their byplay, I pretended nothing had happened.

“Recap episode?” Mordred echoed, confused.

“Uhn,” Fran grunted doubtfully.

Anyway.

“When we — us from Chaldea — Rayshifted into this Singularity, we dropped in out near Whitechapel.” I pointed to the spot on the map, or the general area of it at least, where we had first shown up. “We encountered automata out in the fog. Their weak presence out in that direction tells us that B and M are likely not out there and don't care about that section of the city.”

Mordred cast a suspicious eye at Jackie. “Then why were *you* out there?”

Jackie just looked back at her, completely unbothered. “We were born there,” she answered simply. “It was home.”

I wondered exactly how she meant that. Jack the Ripper was born there? Jackie herself — the human who formed the Heroic Spirit — had been born there? The Assassin Class Servant, Jack the Ripper, had materialized there upon being summoned? Maybe all three.

Ritsuka looked at Jackie, expression somewhere between understanding and sad. I wasn't sure whether I should be happy or not that he could still be surprised by the unfair cruelty of the world.

Impulse made me reach out and lay a hand on Jackie's shoulder, and she leaned into me, smiling and content.

“We should probably check again to see if anything’s changed in the last few days,” I went on, “but I doubt that it has. Sir Mordred, we’ll leave that to you.”

“Yeah, sure,” she said casually. “Ain’t that hard. I can take care of it, no problem.”

“You get the shit job,” Jeanne Alter jeered.

Mordred just grinned. “Better than sitting around here, innit?”

Jeanne Alter flipped her the bird, and Tohsaka scowled thunderously even as Nursery Rhyme giggled.

“We’ve already investigated most of Soho,” I said quickly. My finger swung around to point to that section of the city next. “First, when Ritsuka and Rika’s team went to investigate Victor Frankenstein’s disappearance and found Fran —” Fran’s hands curled into fists as her lips thinned into a tight line — “and later on when we were investigating Andersen’s magical tome.”

“Me and Papa!” Nursery Rhyme said brightly.

And I really didn’t want to think too much about the experience of being at her mercy. The Nameless Forest — what a horrifying thing.

“There were some patrol groups out there, but otherwise, no sign of activity by the enemy. Unless Andersen has anything to add?”

I turned to look at him, but he grimaced and shook his head.

“My own investigations were limited,” he said. “The matter of chief concern for me was the magical tome.” He slanted a meaningful glance over at Nursery Rhyme, who just tilted her head and smiled back at him innocently. “Most of my time was spent trying to avoid direct conflict with it, so the focus of my attention was narrow.”

I hadn’t expected much else. It wasn’t impossible that he’d been holding out on us, letting us come to our own conclusions organically instead of giving us the information directly, because that seemed to be the way he liked to do things, but he hadn’t shown any hints of that in this case.

“We were also doing patrols around this area in the afternoons,” Ritsuka reminded me. “We…didn’t really have to deal with too many enemy patrol groups either, although there were some.”

“Mostly those doll things,” Mordred said with a grunt. “Automata…or whatever. A few of them Helter Skelter, but not as many.”

“That may change now that Paracelsus has been eliminated,” I warned, “but for now, they don’t seem to have much interest in our location either. We’ll have to make sure to keep a close watch for any shifts in the next day or two.”

Rika nodded. “Right, cause they lost a guy. They might swear revenge and come after us in a climactic battle where they reveal that actually, they’re not lefthanded and they’ve been fighting with a handicap the entire time.”

“...Right.”

I was pretty sure I got the gist of what she was saying, at least.

Flamel hummed. “Given what we learned from Paracelsus earlier, it’s not impossible they might replenish their ranks of the Servants they have already lost. If Servants are being summoned by the fog itself, only to be captured and...*adjusted* by the enemy, it may be that their numbers have grown since Frankenstein first recorded the initials of the three original masterminds.”

Or maybe there had always been more than three Servants on the enemy’s side and P, B, and M had just been the ones puppeting the entire thing. It may even be a combination of both, since Nursery Rhyme proved that Servants were still appearing, even several days into this thing.

“Even if we assume you’re right, that may not be as large a problem as it sounds,” said Tohsaka. “After all, it’s entirely random, isn’t it? The Heroic Spirits summoned may have a connection either to the situation or the location, but that doesn’t guarantee they’ll be able to help the other two push their plan forward.”

He had something of a point. That didn’t mean that any of these hypothetical Servants would be pushovers we didn’t have to worry about. The last thing we needed was to have King Arthur actually show up on the enemy’s side again, although — I deliberately avoided looking at Mordred — we *did* technically have someone on our side with an advantage against her, didn’t we?

“We have no way of knowing,” I said. “Until we encounter them, we won’t have any idea if or how many other Servants they’ve managed to subvert in the last few days from anywhere within the city.” Maybe that was even the real purpose behind their patrol groups: keeping an eye out for new Servants materializing from the fog. “That also means we should be doing the same thing. If more Servants actually are being summoned every day, then they could be helpful for us, too.”

“We haven’t seen any, though,” Mash said. “Does that mean that there aren’t actually that many being summoned by the fog?”

“Or that they’re all being snatched up before we even see them,” Ritsuka added grimly.

There was just one snag with the idea, though. “Maybe. But if they were picking up new Servants every day, then there wouldn’t be any reason for them to avoid fielding those Servants against us. The fact we haven’t encountered any others — no, more to the point, Paracelsus came after us himself earlier, and he didn’t have any other Servants with him. If they had enough others to back them up, then there was no reason why he wouldn’t have brought more than just a bunch of Helter Skelter and homunculi.”

“Or they’re all a bunch of weaklings,” Jeanne Alter drawled. She jerked her thumb over at Andersen. “Like the pipsqueak over there.”

Andersen adjusted his glasses, scowling. “We can’t all be violent thugs.”

“Ha! That the best you got?”

“I’m an author,” Andersen said. “*Give me some time.*”

“Write something worth reading, and maybe I will,” Jeanne Alter shot back viciously.

“Enough,” I said sternly, “or am I going to have to put you both in the corner and make you go to bed without supper?”

Jeanne Alter looked at me and very maturely stuck out her tongue.

“Oof,” Rika said. “She’s only been a mom for a day and she’s already pulling out the mom cards!”

Jackie giggled.

“Are we...still assuming the B or M might be famous authors, Miss Taylor?” Mash asked.

Thank you for getting us back on track, I didn’t say, and instead, “We can’t rule it out. But at this point, we might have to expand our view of what can classify as a Caster and look at inventors and others who don’t fit the mold of more traditional heroes, too.”

Because I still couldn’t figure out the robots. What? Why? How? Who could possibly be the Heroic Spirit making them and what did he have to do with robots in the first place?

Ritsuka, Rika, Mash, Flamel, and Tohsaka all nodded thoughtfully, but Fran froze, brow furrowing, and she grimaced, looking down and away.

“Fran?” I asked her. “Is something wrong?”

She looked back up at me, hesitated, and looked away again. “Uhn...”

“Did you think of something?” Mash asked.

“Uhn...Uh-uhn,” Fran replied, uncertain. “Uhn uhn uhng-uhn.”

My mouth drew into a tight line. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea to bring you along with us.”

“Is *that* what she said?” Rika said incredulously.

“We’ve got more than enough Servants to protect us all,” Ritsuka said, turning to me. “And, Senpai... We don’t have any more leads right now, do we? Since we looked into the Clock Tower earlier and didn’t really find any clues down there.”

My lips drew tighter. He wasn’t wrong. It wasn’t that there weren’t other places for us to look, and we still didn’t know whether or not the trackers would wind up panning out for sure, but in terms of a solid direction to go, we didn’t really have any right now and more might not ever materialize. Not if all the enemy needed to do was bide their time and wait.

Whoever had sent out that crow to watch us was almost certainly a mage of some kind, but they would probably be a lot more subtle next time. And if they were anything like a traditional mage, then there was almost no way they would come and confront us themselves, not unless they had set things up in their favor as much as possible.

Of course, I would have said much the same about Paracelsus.

“I’m willing to take responsibility for her,” Mordred said suddenly. “Course, that means I won’t be able to fight as hard as before, but if I gotta be the one to protect her, I’m up for it.”

Fran smiled. “Uhn.”

At the end of the day, pragmatism had to win here. “If you really think you can do it, then we can give it a try.”

“Okay, timeout,” said Rika, jabbing her fingertips into the palm of her opposite hand to form a T. “For those of us who don’t speak adorable, *what* are we trying, here?”

Tohsaka breathed out a sigh and muttered, “I thought I was the only one.”

“Amazing what personal experience does for your capacity for empathy, isn’t it?” said Andersen. “On the other hand, the other one, I can’t explain at all. I suppose some people are just born like that.”

“Fran thinks she might be able to track the traces of magical energy in the Helter Skelter,” Ritsuka explained to his sister. “She...hasn’t really said why or how, just that she’ll tell us once she knows for sure.”

Beep-beep!

When I answered my communicator, Romani’s face appeared in the air. “Romani?”

“About that,” he began, and then backtracked. “Ah, sorry to interrupt without any warning, but this seemed like as good a time as any to tell you guys about this, so I think it’s okay, isn’t it?”

“It has to be.” Marie leaned over his shoulder, face serious. “We’ve been running an analysis of these...Helter Skelter you’ve been encountering, because they’re way out of the norm for that era of London, and the sheer number you’ve seen should be impossible to manufacture in the timeframe we know about. We can’t explain everything, but we *do* have some information on their construction.”

“You do?” Mash asked.

Romani nodded. “Yeah. Putting aside the time constraints, the amount of materials necessary to build that many robots with the sort of articulation and locomotion you’re seeing in those Helter Skelter is just plain ridiculous. There’s no way to do that with any sort of subtlety. We should have detected it by now if they were being built manually in a factory or something, and frankly, the idea that any factory from Victorian London could mass produce those things is just all kinds of impossible, as well —”

“The point,” Marie cut across him, “is that we’ve looked into the discrepancies and structure and ran our theory by Da Vinci, who agreed with us: whoever is creating those Helter Skelter, they’re using a Noble Phantasm to do it, because the Helter Skelter are a part of it.”

A ripple of surprise ran through the entire group.

“No shit,” said Jeanne Alter. Tohsaka himself was too stunned to even think about reprimanding her.

“But wait,” said Mash, “Miss Taylor’s knife was able to cut through them!”

It had. As though their plating was ordinary steel, in fact.

“It’s because the units you’ve encountered so far are simply mass-produced drones.” Da Vinci’s image appeared suddenly in the upper corner of the hologram, sitting over Romani’s shoulder opposite of Marie. “Their mystery is roughly equivalent to what Shakespeare managed to bestow upon Taylor’s Last Resort, and so in terms of how they interact, it should be the same as if they were both ordinary materials. Because that knife is designed specifically for dealing with heavy armor and unusually sturdy materials, it was able to deal with the Helter Skelter’s armor without much issue.

“However,” she added, “if you had attempted to do the same thing to the gray colored Helter Skelter accompanying Paracelsus earlier, you likely would have had a much harder time.”

I could only think of one reason why she would say so.

“Because much more time and effort went into making it, so it’s a higher quality model.”

Da Vinci smiled. “*Esatto!* So far, I’ve identified three distinct variations of the Helter Skelter, distinguished by their differing colorations. The bronze ones are most common, and therefore the weakest. The green ones are slightly less common, but they make up for it by being a full tier higher than their counterparts, in terms of strength and durability. The rarest and most powerful of the whole lot are the gray ones, and that’s why you’ve encountered only one or two of them up to this point.”

“And they’re all part of the master’s Noble Phantasm?” Ritsuka asked.

“Yes,” said Marie.

“More specifically,” said Da Vinci, “they are both the product of the Noble Phantasm and its manifestation. It’s a beautiful thing, really. Unfortunately, that makes it troublesome, as well. The owner is likely limited only in the amount of magical energy he has access to. Otherwise, he can make as many Helter Skelter as he likes for as long as he likes. And if the Grail truly is in his possession...”

“Then the only limit is how long it takes to make each one,” Tohsaka concluded, horrified.

“How frighteningly effective,” said Andersen. “With a force like that at his disposal, it’s no wonder the Association was destroyed so easily.”

“And the culprit could escape without ever having to appear in person,” said Jekyll. “Verily, he might act through his proxies with impunity and engage his foes at truly extreme distances, never once needing to risk his own life and limb. An enemy such as that would be all but untouchable.”

“So what?” Mordred asked, unbothered. “They’re not that strong. We handled them pretty easily earlier today, didn’t we?”

“We have no idea how long it takes to make each one!” Marie snapped. “If the Servant using it only needs a single hour to create one of the highest tier Helder Skelter, then he could have made an entire army of them by now, and the reason you haven’t seen more than a handful is because the rest are guarding the Grail!”

And that was only assuming it took an hour. It could take more, but it could also take much less. If he could pump out the gray Helder Skelter every five minutes, then it was entirely possible that whoever he was really did have an army of them guarding the Grail.

“So what?” Mordred repeated. “They ain’t that strong. If everyone else is too scared to fight ‘em all at once, then I’ll just turn ‘em all into scrap by myself.”

Marie’s eyes flashed.

“A concentration of power like that would be detectable, wouldn’t it?” I asked, cutting across them both. “Have Chaldea’s sensors picked anything like that up while we were out investigating?”

“Unfortunately not,” Romani answered. “Forgetting about the fog for a minute, we’re pretty sure the other two guys are Casters, right? If they’re set up anywhere, it would be on top of a ley line, and in that case, it would be like sitting in its shadow. Even with our sensors, detecting the difference would be way too much to ask for.”

Marie grimaced and closed her eyes for a moment, taking in a deep, calming breath. “Unfortunately, this is the limit of the assistance we’re able to give you from here. As you get closer, we may be able to offer more information, but until then, you’ll have to continue the investigation using your own wits.”

Rika let out a despairing moan. “We’re going to have to do more running around? My headless chicken impression is pretty good, but not *that* good!”

“The benefit of practice, no doubt,” Andersen drawled. Rika stuck her tongue out at him.

“I *do* have some good news,” Da Vinci said with a smile, and then apologetically, added, “though not, I’m sorry to say, Rika, anything that would help you find the culprits in possession of the Grail. Mash, if you would be so kind as to set up your shield and prepare for a supply drop in the parlor, I have a present that needs to be delivered.”

“O-oh!” said Mash. “Yes, of course, Miss Da Vinci!”

She squeezed her way out of the group and hurried back to the parlor, manifesting her shield as she went, and then, when she looked out across the room, she hesitated and turned back towards us. “U-um... There isn’t enough space to set my shield down.”

“It’s perfectly fine, Miss Mash,” said Jekyll. “If the furniture happens to present an obstacle to you, then I give my full permission to you to move it as needed. I only request that you return the room to its previous state afterwards.”

Mash smiled. “Okay! Thank you, Doctor Jekyll.”

She set her shield off to the side of the fireplace, leaned up against the mantelpiece, and then reached out to take gentle hold of the couch so that she could lift it up and move it backwards.

“Here,” said Ritsuka, and he sidled out past the group to go and join her, “let me help, Mash.”

She favored him with a smile as he joined her, taking hold of one side of the sofa so that she wasn’t trying to awkwardly manage the whole thing by herself without damaging it.

“Thank you, Senpai.”

“No problem, Mash.”

Rika chuckled, low and quiet, grinning as she watched them move the furniture together.

“Fu-*freaking* domestic,” Jeanne Alter murmured.

“They’re cute together,” Nursery Rhyme said. “Don’t you think so, Papa?”

Unfortunately, she didn’t try to keep her voice down at all, and Ritsuka nearly dropped the chair he had grabbed while Mash stumbled on thin air. The tips of their ears were both burning, but they pretended they hadn’t heard her.

“Good grief,” Tohsaka said.

“Watching them hurts,” Andersen agreed.

Because you never had much luck in love either? I didn’t say. No need to start a petty fight, right now.

Once the furniture had been moved out of the way, Mash set her shield up in the space that had been opened up and stepped back. Hers and Ritsuka’s cheeks were both still faintly red, and they deliberately avoided looking in each other’s direction, but they gave no other sign that Nursery Rhyme’s innocent question had bothered them.

I wondered if it really was so innocent.

“R-ready, Miss Da Vinci,” said Mash.

“Director, that’s your cue,” Da Vinci said. “I’ve already arranged everything else, so all that’s needed is for you to send it.”

Marie, whose lips had been steadily pulling into a tighter and tighter line, startled, and then turned to the side. The sound of her fingers tapping was only barely picked up by the microphone. “R-right. Coordinates...have already been set. Parameters are all adjusted. Rayshifting in three, two, one...”

There was a brief flash of light. A magic circle lifted up off of the surface of Mash’s shield, glowing brightly, and then, a moment later, was replaced by a small box. It thumped gently as it landed.

Mash stepped over and bent down to pick it up, handling it gently in case it was something fragile.

“This particular gift is meant for Taylor,” said Da Vinci.

I looked back at her. “Me?”

“Yes.” Da Vinci smiled. “The Director *did* tell you, didn’t she? It took a little longer than I would have liked it to, all things considered, but I wasn’t about to let a little fog beat me, no matter how virulent a toxin it is.”

My heart leapt in my chest. The gas mask that would let me go outside during the afternoons.

“You finished it?”

“Of course,” Da Vinci said smugly as Mash handed the box over to me (“Here, Miss Taylor.”), and I tried not to seem too eager as I accepted it. “If I’d had access to better resources, I would have had it finished in a single afternoon. With our situation as it is, however, I had to improvise a little, so there was nothing to be done except to cannibalize a project or two and use whatever I had lying around.”

I stopped just short of opening it. “Whatever you had lying around?”

Not one of my spider puppets, surely. I’d been looking forward to finally having some of those.

“A few resources I wasn’t otherwise using,” Da Vinci clarified. “Go on. Open it. I guarantee you, you’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

I hesitated for only a second longer, then undid the latch holding it closed and flipped open the lid. I was half-expecting to find some sort of medieval fantasy version of a gas mask, like a clockwork take on the sort of thing a firefighter would wear, with brass gears and tanned leather and some sort of miniaturized pulley system that worked the filter. Something that would have fit right in amongst the famous pages of Da Vinci’s sketches.

That wasn’t what I found inside that box. Instead...

“Da Vinci, this...”

...a familiar pair of polarized white lenses looked back at me, shifting through iridescent colors in the flickering light of the fireplace and the gas lamps. They contrasted starkly against the black fabric they were set in, but complemented the false mandibles along the jawline that gave it an almost insectoid appearance.

“Like I said,” said Da Vinci, like she hadn’t just handed me a piece of my past, “I had to work with what I had lying around. Conveniently, that happened to be something of yours you no longer had a need for, so I didn’t need to worry about adjusting the sizing or the fit, only about adding the functionality necessary to filter out the fog and the magical energy inside of it. I hope you don’t mind.”

It was my old mask. The one I’d worn at the end of the world, when everything had started falling to pieces and all the lines had started to blur. I hadn’t worn it since then, except for that simulation with the twins — hadn’t even looked at it myself in nearly two years.

“No.” I lifted the mask out of the box. I wasn’t sure how to feel about it. After all, it was a relic of the person I used to be. The idea of wearing it again was both nostalgic and dreadful. “You’re right, I didn’t need it anymore. I already told you that you could do whatever you wanted with it.”

It wasn’t quite the same as I remembered it, of course. There were vents along the mandibles, angled down, and a new piece over the mouth and nose with perforations that revealed the filter beneath it, but Da Vinci, artist that she was, had designed them to fit the rest of the aesthetic. Anyone who had never seen it before would have thought the additions were a part of the original mask.

“Dear me,” murmured Flamel, “what a frightening visage.”

“Fitting, though, all things considered,” Andersen added. I didn’t exactly have room to argue, considering the thing was something I made to begin with.

“Wait a minute,” said Rika, “I’ve seen that before!”

“You have?” Marie demanded.

Rika nodded. “Yeah! During Senpai’s Caster simulation thing a couple months back! It was part of the costume she was wearing!”

Ritsuka’s brow furrowed, and he leaned over to get a closer look. “Now that you mention it…”

Mash blinked. “It is?”

Rika nodded.

“I thought it was just a scary costume she made up for that simulation,” she said. “But I guess it was based upon a real thing?” He brow furrowed, too. “Hey, wait a minute! That costume was super scary and super weird and I’ve never seen it before in my life! Why is it based upon a real thing? Does that mean that the rest of it was real, too? Senpai, I have so many questions!”

I was just going to shut it down and avoid the question, but a thought occurred to me, and even if I didn’t think it was my usual way of dealing with things, it was too perfect, too quintessentially Alec for me to simply not use it.

“Call it the legacy of a misspent youth.”

A beat passed, and then Mordred broke out into cackles. Marie’s face, meanwhile, had settled into something conflicted, like she couldn’t decide whether she was supposed to be mortified by my answer or satisfied that I’d managed to dodge the question.

She wasn’t the only one with a reaction like that. Most of the rest of the group was just confused. They didn’t have any of the context for when and where Rika had seen my mask before or why it might be strange for me to have one, so all they could do was wonder what in the world was going on and what I meant about the legacy of a misspent youth. Arash was the only one who would probably have understood exactly how truthful I was being, and he wasn’t there at the moment.

“I suppose it’s not the years, it’s the mileage, isn’t it?” Andersen muttered.

For once, something we could both agree on.

“Regardless,” said Da Vinci, “the filter on that mask should keep you safe from the fog, as long as you secure it properly. Since it’s yours to begin with, I imagine you already know how to do that, so I won’t bother giving you instructions on how. Regrettably, there wasn’t enough time for me to do anything with the lenses, so while they are indeed still a match for your prescription, I couldn’t add an infrared function or anything of the sort to make it easier for you to see in the fog. I’m sorry.”

Frankly, I hadn’t been expecting anything like that in the first place, so there was nothing for me to be disappointed about.

“It’s fine.”

Although now that she’d brought it up, it would actually have been pretty incredible to have something like that added to the lenses. Something that could see magical energy would be unimaginably useful, if calibrated specifically to look for dense concentrations of it — like, say, a Servant’s spiritual core.

“Is Mommy going to wear that?” Jackie asked curiously.

I offered her a small, patient smile. “Later, when we go back outside.”

For now, the mask went back into the box, and I redid the latch. Without anywhere else to put it for the moment, I just held onto it, tucking it against my hip. Somehow, it felt heavy, like a weight pulling down on my fingers, and yet it couldn’t have weighed all that much more than it had originally.

It was just a mask, I told myself. Silk, chitin, nylon, glass, and whatever Da Vinci had added for the filtration. It shouldn’t be any different to wear it again now than it had been a few months ago.

To Da Vinci, I asked, “You included the Ley Line Terminals on the map you programmed into our communicators, right?”

“Yes,” she answered. “It might be a bit difficult to navigate your way to them in the fog, but the location data should be accurate to that era.”

“Hold on!” said Rika. “Seriously! Senpai, that costume! That’s way too good to be a Halloween costume! That’s real silk, isn’t it?”

“Spun by real spiders,” Andersen added.

“Drop it,” Marie said tersely.

“But,” Rika began.

Her brother set a hand on her shoulder. “Maybe later, Rika. I don’t think now is the time.”

Rika subsided, pouting. “It’s never the time,” she muttered, crossing her arms petulantly. “Is it ever going to be later?”

Maybe not. With everything that had happened so quickly after Okeanos, I'd forgotten to ever ask Marie about it, but if her reaction here was any indication, then what she'd originally told me about keeping my past as much a secret as possible seemed to still be relevant. Rika's curiosity might never be sated.

Some part of me was relieved. Some part of me felt just a little bit guilty.

"Regarding the ley lines," said Flamel into the awkward silence that followed, "if your data should, for whatever reason, prove inaccurate, I should be able to map them myself here."

He gestured to the diorama.

"Did you ever investigate them before we arrived?" I asked.

"In person, no," he said, shaking his head. "However, I sent Sir Mordred to look into their locations, as a matter of eliminating possible places for the enemy to have been hiding."

Mordred grunted. "Didn't find shit out there. Buncha Helter Skelter and some of them homunculi, but no Servants or nothing."

"They *could* be underground," Romani murmured thoughtfully.

We all turned to him. "Underground?" Ritsuka asked.

Romani blinked. "Ah. Well, um, building underneath London can get a bit dicey, at least for normal construction, because of the high water table, but that doesn't mean underground structures are *impossible* or anything. I mean, the Clock Tower kind of proves that, doesn't it?"

"Most of that is Association propaganda," Marie told us all. "It would be inconvenient if the city started trying to build down into spaces where the Clock Tower already exists, so the Association has been convincing people for centuries that the ground isn't stable enough to support extensive subterranean structures."

"Wait, really?" Romani asked incredulously.

"It's not that there isn't some truth to it," Marie admitted. "But you do realize how deep the Clock Tower goes, don't you? For that matter, just how far it stretches beneath London! If it was completely impossible to build anything beneath the city, then something like that would never have existed!"

I wasn't sure she was giving enough credit to the magi who built it, just based upon the kinds of things I'd seen Shakers do in the past, but it wasn't a fight worth picking, so I didn't. She probably knew better about the subject than I did anyway.

"Then we have another lead," I said. "Sir Mordred will check on Whitechapel and see if the enemy's presence has changed there in the past few days. Once she's returned from that, we can take Fran out and have her see if she can follow the trail of one of the Helter Skelter and lead us to whoever is behind them. Depending on how that goes, we'll return to the apartment for dinner, and time permitting, investigate one of the Ley Line Terminals afterwards. Any objections?"

No one spoke up. I nodded and turned to Mordred.

“Then, Sir Mordred, you should leave as soon as you can. We’ll be waiting here to hear your report.”