**Chapter CLIII: Londinium Hostage Crisis**

“Welcome — or should I say, a pleasure to finally meet you, Chaldeans.”

The crow’s beak moved, and from out of its mouth came that smokey alto, a husky voice that dripped culture and condescension in equal measure. I didn’t recognize it, although that wasn’t really saying much, only that it didn’t belong to anyone we had yet met either here in London or any of the previous Singularities.

“You know who we are,” Emiya said with an undercurrent of accusation. His wasn’t the only body that was tense and rigid, so on guard that he would have seemed more relaxed behind actual fortress walls.

The crow tilted its head. “I should hope so. After all, I’ve spent oh so much time with you these last few days, and yet you never did me even the courtesy of a simple hello. Quite rude of you, don’t you think?”

“The crow the other day,” Ritsuka murmured, having realized the same thing I had.

The crow was completely disposable, or at least replaced easily enough that there functionally wasn’t a difference. The one Arash had shot down had disappeared completely by the time it hit the ground, so if this one was the same, then it wouldn’t set her back much if we destroyed it, too.

“Not the first time I had the pleasure of seeing all of you in action, but I’m afraid it may be the last,” said the crow.

And if I asked, there was no way she would tell us exactly how long she’d been watching us for. The answer would likely be “since the moment you arrived,” and that was either true or an attempt to psych us out. It didn’t make that much difference about what she knew either way.

“You said that you wouldn’t burn down any of the branches if you were us,” I said bluntly.

The crow ruffled its feathers. “My, my, where *are* your manners, young lady? Did your mother never teach you to observe the niceties? Why, we haven’t even yet been formally introduced, and you want to talk business already?”

Jackie bristled on my behalf, hands reaching for her knives, and I stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. If she noticed the slight tremor in my fingers, the only visible sign that remark had hit a little too close to home, then she didn’t say.

It was the shock of it more than anything else. I thought I’d gotten over shots at my mom a long time ago. Maybe I’d just been thinking about her so much the last few days that it left me a little more sensitive to them.

“If you’ve been watching us as long as you say, then you already know our names,” I told the crow. It felt a little silly talking to one like it was a person, which I guess was how others must have felt when talking to me through Huginn or Muninn. “So it seems to me like the one being rude here is you, who hasn’t revealed her name to us yet.”

“Hey, yeah!” Rika agreed.

A throaty chuckle rumbled out of the crow’s throat. “Oh, but you *are* a clever one, aren’t you? I suppose, in the spirit of fairness, I can at least do that much, can’t I? Very well. If you must have a name, you can call me *M*. That should be more than enough for you, seeing as you never properly gave me your own names, did you? Especially as you’ve been using a fake one for Mister Flamel over there.”

Flamel startled, and the crow honed in on it immediately, turning its head to look his way.

“Oh yes,” it said, victoriously smug, “your little attempts at subterfuge were all for naught, I’m afraid. Even were they not so painfully obvious, your indiscretion with dear Paracelsus revealed the truth all on its own. The fact you allowed him to shout your true name to the world was quite the oversight — all to the better, at least for my benefit.”

M. As in, the mastermind behind all of this? Wasn’t it supposed to be a man, or…had I just simply made that assumption because of my Moriarty theory?

“Uhn!” Fran growled, taking a step towards the crow. Uselessly, because there wasn’t anything she could do to it that would accomplish anything meaningful, not when we’d already killed one. “Ah, uhn, uhn, ah-ah, uhn!”

“That’s right!” said Mash. “If you really are M, then that means you’re the one responsible! Not only did you turn both Professor Babbage and Paracelsus into monsters, you even forced him to commit suicide!”

“Regrettable,” M said, “but necessary. Poor Professor Babbage… Why, if he had just done as he was supposed to instead of allowing sentiment to get the better of him, he would still be here now, watching his world of steam come to fruition. That’s the trouble with men like them: they tend to grow a conscience.”

“Hey,” said Mordred, “you keep dancing around the whole thing. Why shouldn’t we just burn down that whole damn forest down there?”

“Oh, and now I’ve forgotten *my* manners!” M gasped melodramatically. “Dear me, how ever did I let myself get carried away? Please allow me to correct my mistake. The reason why you might want to avoid burning any of my forest of thorns away is because I’m ashamed to admit that I could not guarantee poor Renée’s safety if you did.”

Behind my mask, my eyes widened. She had Renée?

Flamel moved first, before anyone could stop him. By the time Emiya even thought of reaching for his bow or the implication sank in deeply enough to make anyone else shout, he was already pressing his hands together, red light flowing from between his fingers, and the rooftop warped, flexed, and contorted. The tiles snaked up the crow’s legs and pulled taut like shackles, and the stone rose up and wrapped around the body, holding it tight.

The suddenness of it killed everyone else’s reactions, and in the stunned silence that followed, Flamel’s quiet fury echoed like thunder.

“What,” he ground out like a glacier, his face a rictus of anger so intense it almost burned to look at, “have you done to her?”

The crow cackled again, as though it wasn’t held fast under the threat of being violently crushed. “Why, nothing!” said M, still smug. “*Yet*. You see, while the whole lot of you were quite happy to go gallivanting across the city searching for my little hideaway, you left your dear princess all but undefended. It was child’s play to arrange for a…*distraction* of your comrades and take your precious daughter while their attention was elsewhere.”

“You’re lying,” I accused her.

“Am I?” But she sounded amused, not threatened or angry or defensive, as she might have been if she really was lying. “I suppose you’ll find out for yourselves soon enough, won’t you? After all, that cozy little apartment you’ve been playing house in isn’t all that far from here, is it? You will see with your own eyes that she’s no longer there.”

My mouth drew into a tight line. Calling someone’s bluff only worked if they were actually bluffing. An enemy who only ever told you the truth was one of the most terrifying.

So what the hell had she done to keep Nursery Rhyme and the Jabberwocky busy thoroughly enough and long enough to sneak in and grab Renée?

“Where have you taken her?” Flamel demanded.

“Where else but my secret lair? Where she will stay, with me, until my work is done and there is no more need for her.” And then, all traces of humor vanished, and M’s voice became cold and hard. “Hear me well, Chaldeans. Abandon this course and your precious princess will remain unharmed. She need not suffer even so much as a pricked finger. If, however, you insist upon violence, then violence shall be visited upon your dear Renée. After all, I don’t *truly* need her — alive, that is.”

And with this final line, the crow erupted into flames, burning away until not even ash remained of it. M’s sadistic laughter, on the other hand, still echoed for several seconds afterwards, and it wasn’t truly gone until all traces of the crow had vanished.

There was a bare second of silence, a heartbeat, as we all absorbed what had just happened, but the instant it passed, Flamel was moving, marching away from the group with purpose.

“Gramps!” Mordred called.

“Do not try to stop me!” he all but snarled back at her. “I’m returning to the apartment — whether you accompany me or not doesn’t matter to me, as long as you don’t get in my way!”

He stormed off, and we all had no other choice but to follow him. Emiya, surprisingly, was at the head of the group, the first to fall into step behind Flamel, and the intense look on his face was nearly as worrying as the uncharacteristic rage on Flamel’s.

“Senpai,” Ritsuka began.

“I know,” I told him.

“Uh-uhn,” Fran grunted.

“We have to check on Miss Renée,” Mash said quietly, to avoid drawing Flamel’s attention. “If…she really has been kidnapped…”

Then we had to go after her.

M couldn’t have spelled out for us any clearer that this was a trap. She might as well have had her crow carry a placard and everything announcing it. The trouble was, even if it was a trap, what other choice did we have? Were we just supposed to leave Renée to whatever fate M had cooked up for her? Because I doubted any of us believed that she wouldn’t hurt Renée as long as we just stayed out of her business.

My hands curled into fists, and I had to force myself to relax them.

Fuck that shit. I hadn’t let it go with Dinah, and I had no intention of starting here now. Besides, it wasn’t like that was a viable option to begin with. M was an enemy we had to defeat no matter what, the last of this Singularity’s masterminds, and supposedly the one who had started it all. One way or another, we had to go after her and defeat her and take the Grail she was using to perpetuate both this Singularity and this fog.

“Then we’ll rescue her,” I said, like it was a law of the universe and couldn’t be questioned.

The twins nodded, and so did Mash. “Yeah.”

“And tear this M lady a new asshole in the process,” Mordred added.

“Bleeding hearts, the whole lot of you,” Jeanne Alter said, but she didn’t try to convince us otherwise.

It took us ten long minutes to make it back to the apartment, and when we got there —

“Holy shit,” Rika swore quietly.

— it was to find both the front door and a large portion of the wall smashed in, like someone had fired a tank shell at it without any care for the damage. The windows had been shattered, the brickwork utterly obliterated, and through the gaping wound left behind, we could see the wrecked parlor, with the furniture destroyed and scattered about the floor, bits of stuffing from the cushions strewn about and left to lie where they’d fallen, shards of wood from the couch and chairs lying in jagged chunks.

A closer look, however, showed deep gouges in the facade around the enormous hole, as though some creature with long, sharp claws had ripped its way through with sheer strength. Further inside, we’d find more along the walls and the floor, carved into the wood paneling. Of that, I had no doubt.

Flamel stopped short as the full scope of the damage became clearer, sucking in a short, sharp gasp that was so quiet I wasn’t sure I hadn’t imagined it. Then, he rushed up the stairs, taking them two at a time as though he had forgotten that he was a Servant and could simply return to spirit form to make things faster, and through the remains of what could only have been the front door.

We couldn’t do anything else except follow him, picking our way across the rubble not unlike how we had at the British Museum.

“Renée!” Flamel shouted into the apartment. “Renée, please, come out this instant!”

She did not appear. There was only the ringing silence of his fading echo.

“Oh no,” Mash whispered.

“Renée!” he tried one more time.

“Abraham!” Jekyll’s voice called, and he stepped into the threshold of the tea room. His cravat had been wrapped around his nose and mouth to form a makeshift mask. “Thank goodness, you’ve returned!”

Behind him, Tohsaka and Nursery Rhyme slowly and cautiously came into view. None of them looked any the worse for wear, at least not physically, but Tohsaka’s expression was hard and stony and grim.

“Doctor Jekyll,” Flamel began hurriedly, “Renée, is she —”

“Gone,” said Tohsaka.

“There was an assault upon the apartment, Abraham,” Jekyll explained. “An awful creature, a monster straight out of the depths of Hell, it broke through the front door and caused the awful mess you see before you. Mister Tohsaka and Miss Alice engaged him, but I fear, in the chaos, dear Renée went missing. We attempted to find her with the resources we had available, but alas, since we cannot safely venture out into the mist…”

He gestured to the broken window and the devastated front wall, where the fog hovered, just barely inside. There seemed to be some sort of force holding it at bay, much like when Jackie and Robin had attacked us. Confirmation, of a sort, that Flamel’s bounded field was keeping it out, because I didn’t have a better explanation that didn’t rely on more good will than I was willing to ascribe to M just then.

Flamel staggered as though he had taken a heavy blow, hand pressed to his heart. “She really was taken!”

“I can only offer my sincerest apologies, Abraham,” said Jekyll. “If I had just realized the enemy’s intent sooner —”

“Would that it were so easy as to blame you,” Flamel said. He squeezed his eyes shut, grimacing. “But I have gravely underestimated our enemy’s cleverness and cruelty. I thought it so ingenious…”

I turned to Jekyll. I didn’t dare to take off my mask, not until Flamel fixed the damage. “You mentioned a monster?”

He nodded. “A terrible thing, twelve feet tall, with arms that reached the floor and a beastly maw filled with the sharpest teeth. It had eyes like hellfire and claws fit to rend a man in two, and it was clad in fur of the blackest night.”

“A werewolf?” Rika asked incredulously. “You were attacked by a *werewolf*?”

“I…suppose it bore a passing resemblance to such a thing, yes,” said Jekyll.

Rika groaned. “Dracula in Orléans, and now Frankenstein and the Wolfman in London! What next, Godzilla?”

“Uhn…?” Fran said uncertainly.

“She’s being melodramatic,” Ritsuka said apologetically. “Doctor Jekyll, was this, um, werewolf a Servant?”

Jekyll grimaced and shook his head. “I’m afraid I couldn’t say for sure, Ritsuka. It had uncommon strength to have made such a mess of the apartment, and the Jabberwocky…”

“Got torn to pieces,” said Tohsaka. “I’m not sure it was a Servant either, but it was powerful enough that even Alice’s Jabberwocky couldn’t do anything more than keep it occupied until it decided to leave. There was…also something rather unsettling about it. It had a unique ability to mimic others’ voices — including yours, Flamel.”

“It mimicked my voice?” Flamel echoed incredulously. “What on Earth…”

“Before we continue,” I began, “it might be better if we could have this conversation without prying ears listening in. Caster, if you could fix the damage…”

Flamel jolted. “Yes… Yes, of course, forgive me the oversight.”

He pressed his hands together the way I’d seen him do every other time before, and then red light flowed out from between his fingers, and the room slowly shifted like someone had pressed the reverse button on a video. Stuffing packed itself back into the cushions, then the cushions themselves knitted the tears closed, and the shards of wood slithered back into their proper places, all seamlessly. The pieces of shattered glass leapt back into their frames and sealed over without a single crack, and the bricks and dust sprang back into the shape of a wall, followed shortly by the wooden paneling and all of the rest.

By the time the front door snapped into place, it was once more as though nothing had ever happened. Finally, I could take off my mask and put my glasses back on.

“Done,” Flamel announced unnecessarily.

I gave a brief nod and turned back to Jekyll and Tohsaka. “You mentioned something about mimicking voices.”

Tohsaka grimaced. “Yes,” he said. “It wasn’t…used on us, exactly. It didn’t seem to see the need. Brute force was doing the job just fine. Its target seemed to be Renée, and when it called to her, it had some kind of hypnotic effect. She came walking towards it like she was in some kind of trance.”

“Did it hurt her?” Flamel asked, pained.

“No,” Tohsaka answered. “Although whether or not it tried is a different story.”

“It sought her out, Abraham,” Jekyll said. “The instant it laid its terrible gaze upon her, it dispensed with all pretense of playing with the Jabberwocky and attempted to lay its hands upon her. Fortunately, the Jabberwocky is quite the hardy fellow, and it managed to hold onto the beast long enough to disrupt its hold on her and allow her to escape. After that…”

“She vanished!” said Nursery Rhyme. “I didn’t let her into Wonderland, so she could be anywhere!”

This didn’t do anything to make Flamel feel better.

“And when she fled,” Flamel said, closing his eyes tightly, “she must have run right into the enemy’s arms.”

“I’m sorry,” Jekyll said again.

“Can’t say I’ve heard of a werewolf that could be a Heroic Spirit,” Emiya said thoughtfully. “Unlike Dracula, there isn’t really what you might call a prototypical werewolf, at least not one that has a name.” He glanced at Arash. “You?”

Arash shook his head, frowning. “Afraid not.”

“I knew a guy kinda like that, once,” Mordred said. “Or, well, I knew *of* a guy kinda like that. Never had the chance to meet him face to face or nothing, though. Doesn’t even sound like him either.”

“Maybe the murder tyke has some idea,” Jeanne Alter said, looking over at Jackie.

But Jackie just shook her head and said, “We never met anyone like that with Mister P.”

“And somehow,” said Ritsuka, “I don’t think monster movie villains make it to the Throne of Heroes.”

“Not unless the story they’re based on was enough first,” Emiya agreed.

“It looks like Perrault might be here, after all.”

“Who?” the twins both asked.

“He wrote the original form of several very famous modern fairy tales,” Mash explained. “Later on, several of them were compiled and edited by the Brothers Grimm, some of them with many details altered or expanded upon.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell,” said Rika.

“You’ve heard of them before,” I told her. “Wasn’t Doctor Jekyll’s description enough? A giant wolf with huge claws, huge eyes, huge teeth, and who could mimic others’ voices?”

The moment the lightbulb went on in Rika’s head was visible. “The Big Bad Wolf! *Little Red Riding Hood*! My, Grandma, what large teeth you have!”

“Wait, really?” her brother said incredulously.

*All the better to eat you with,* I thought but didn’t say. Frankly, I hadn’t realized it at first either. Maybe because I’d been thinking of fairy tales earlier, however, it seemed like the thing that made sense, especially when we had the living embodiment of nursery rhymes right here in the same room with us.

“It was one of our early theories about P, B, and M,” I did say. “The Father of Fairy Tales. *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*, whose castle was defended by a forest of thorns. *Little Red Riding Hood*, who, in the original version, was eaten by the wicked wolf and never rescued.”

“Oh dear,” said Nursery Rhyme. “Never rescued? He’ll be invincible, then.”

What?

“What do you mean, invincible?” asked Tohsaka.

“Stories are stories and dying is dying,” said Nursery Rhyme matter-of-factly. “Beings born of stories have to live and die by their stories. If the wicked wolf was never killed, then by definition, he can’t die, can he? Jabberwocky is the same way! The only way to kill him is to use the vorpal sword! Otherwise, the only thing you can do is hope he runs out of energy before you do!”

The pieces began to slot into place, the bits that didn’t make sense before now fitting into the puzzle.

“That’s so hax!” Rika complained.

In fact, I’d had a thought about it before, hadn’t I? About how the forest of thorns could be easier or harder to deal with depending on whether it had to follow the rules of the story it came from. And what if it did? What if everything that came out of Perrault’s Noble Phantasm had to obey the rules of the story it had originated from? Everything in it had to die the way it was killed, and every bit of magic had to obey the laws written into the tale?

“I… You know, Rika? You’re right,” said her brother. “It *is* hax.”

Nursery Rhyme giggled, pleased.

In that case, burning it down might not accomplish much of anything. Maybe it would have opened up a short window for us to go through, or maybe it would have just remained completely impervious, regenerating so quickly that we wouldn’t have been able to squeeze a fly through, let alone ourselves. But that cut both ways. If the magic of the forest of thorns had to follow the rules of *Sleeping Beauty*, then they were there to protect the princess and would open the way for her rescuer.

And M had just made the mistake of kidnapping the closest thing we had to a princess: the only daughter of a rich Parisian alchemist who had created her to fill the hole of the child he and his wife could never have. Perrault couldn’t have written a better backstory if he tried.

“No,” I said, “this is actually good news.”

Once again, everyone turned to look at me, incredulous.

“What?” Mordred said. “You hit your head or something?”

“Or something,” Jeanne Alter said.

“Um, the way they said it isn’t the best,” Mash began, “but are you sure, Miss Taylor? M-maybe…you really did hit your head recently?”

“I mean, Senpai’s usually got something cooking in that head,” Rika said, prefacing the rest, “but, um, I have…no idea where she’s going with this one.”

“You’re not looking at it from the right angle,” I told them all. “First of all…”

I fiddled with my communicator for a second, opening up the communications link with Chaldea. A moment later — *beep-beep* — and Marie’s face appeared in the air.

“What did you need?” she asked me immediately.

“You’ve been keeping up with the developments on our end?”

“Of course,” she answered, sounding only slightly annoyed that I had even bothered asking. “Flamel’s homunculus has been kidnapped by the last of the supposed masterminds of this Singularity and taken to her workshop, where the steam engine behind the fog, Angrboða, is presumably being kept as well, fueled by the Holy Grail.”

“I’m glad no one was injured, at least!” Romani’s voice called from the background.

“Read the room!” Marie hissed back at him.

First, there was a question I should probably ask, as much for Flamel’s peace of mind as to confirm the concept would work out the way I thought it would.

“Do you still have a read of her vital signs?”

“Yes,” said Marie, looking over at something on the side. “There’s some anomalous activity in her magic circuits that we can’t explain, almost like she’s cycling energy through them, but there’s been no signs of any damage done to her physical body. Whatever else she might have taken her for, M hasn’t hurt…Renée yet.”

And just a little bit, Flamel relaxed. “Yet,” he emphasized. “There is no guarantee things will stay that way.”

Marie frowned. “No, I suppose there isn’t.”

“Director,” I said, “the fact you can still read her vitals also means you can still track her location, doesn’t it?”

Surprised understanding rippled across the rest of the group.

“Yes,” Marie answered simply.

“And you could forward that to our maps here?”

Marie’s brow furrowed. “Yes, we could.” Her eyes narrowed on me. “You’re going to rescue her.”

There was a note of disapproval in her voice. A lingering prejudice, if I had to guess, about homunculi and their worth, or maybe just the insistence on something that was ultimately pointless, since Renée would disappear with the Singularity.

That didn’t make rescuing her any less worth doing.

“Yes.”

“Wait,” said Rika, “don’t we already know where René is? That’s the whole reason we were down in that creepy thorny subway tunnel, wasn’t it? To find M’s super secret lair?”

“We know where we *think* they are,” I clarified. M had done plenty of things to convince me we’d been on the right track, but it was never confirmed. “But that doesn’t mean we were right. Director?”

She didn’t look entirely happy about it, but after a moment, Marie turned away and started typing at her console’s keyboard. A few seconds later, there was a beep on my communicator, notifying me of the update. When I loaded up the map, there was a stark, red dot, right next to the marker for the spot where we’d thought the entrance to M’s lair would be.

“The reading is coming from deep underground,” Marie explained. “We have no data showing anything in that area except for untouched earth, so whatever is there, it doesn’t exist in our records from proper history.”

“Oh my god,” Rika whispered, “she really did build a Bond lair!”

My cheek twitched, but I did my best to pretend she hadn’t said anything. I didn’t want to have to explain the memory that triggered of another villain who had done something similar. Too much to unpack.

“That’s not very far from the spot we were investigating,” Mash noted.

“So we *were* on the right track,” I concluded. “And M has done us another favor — if Perrault really is involved and the forest of thorns is his, then this gives us a direct line right past their defenses. We won’t have to do anything except waltz right up to the entrance and walk in.”

Jeanne Alter groaned. “Seriously? You telling me we’re not going to burn any of it down anymore?”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“Ugh!” she grunted, crossing her arms over her chest and looking away. She glared at some spot on the wall, as thought it might burst into flames just from her looking at it long and hard enough.

“M gave us the way into her own base!” Ritsuka breathed. “Senpai, that’s…!”

“Just what we needed to put an end to all of this,” Arash finished for him.

“And when the Singularity disappears, everything inside of it that doesn’t belong will disappear, too,” Marie said, voice hard. “For those things which have merely deviated from proper history, they’ll be restored to their place. Those things which don’t belong but which are products of events inside the Singularity will simply be erased. All of you know that already, so then you have to know that rescuing Flamel’s homunculus is pointless.” Over the protests of the twins and Jekyll, she added, “Even if you managed to rescue her despite being at the heart of the enemy’s power, her lifespan will only be measured in hours! At best!”

“Director!” Romani protested.

“You know that as well as I do!” she snapped back at him. “The mission and the safety of our team’s members takes priority over any life inside the Singularities, no matter who it is! That doesn’t change just because they make friends with the people in there!”

“That might be true,” Ritsuka began, “but Director Marie — !”

“Director.” My voice cut through the argument like a knife, and I met her eyes straight on. “Does the length of her lifespan dictate the value of her life itself? Is she worth less simply because she won’t live as long?”

Marie faltered. She knew exactly what I was driving at. “That’s…! The circumstances aren’t remotely…!”

“Is Renée’s life less valuable simply because it’s short?” I asked again.

For a few tense seconds, she couldn’t formulate a proper response, her mouth moving but no sounds making it past her lips. What I could only imagine were her sensibilities as a mage must have been fighting her morals as a decent person, and the inability to reconcile them played out across her face in a series of rapidfire battles.

Eventually, she bit her lip and hung her head, unable to hold my gaze. “No. You’re right. A person’s value can’t…can’t be measured by something as simple as the length of their lifespan.” Her head shot up, expression fierce. “But that doesn’t mean you’re allowed to go doing something stupid like sacrificing your life for her!” She glared at each of us in turn. “That goes for the rest of you, too! I mean it! You’re not allowed to die, do you understand?”

“Yes, Director!” the twins and Mash all echoed at once.

She looked at me, so I had to say, “Of course.”

“I’m afraid,” Flamel began gravely, “that there is another concern that we must take into account.”

“Another concern?” Ritsuka asked.

Jekyll shifted, alarm on his face. “Abraham, are you sure?”

Flamel heaved out a quiet sigh, but didn’t answer him directly. Instead, he dropped heavily into the nearest chair, and he looked every bit of his age.

“I have not been entirely honest with you, my friends, as I’m sure I’ve proven numerous times throughout our partnership in this Singularity,” he said slowly. “I have concealed, misdirected, or outright obfuscated a number of details, not out of malicious intent, but rather an abundance of caution. I would say it was not my intent to deceive you, but if I’m being completely honest, it was. For the sake of also deceiving the enemy at times, but not always.”

“What are you saying?” Marie demanded.

“I did not make Renée on a mere whim,” he told us, “nor was she created solely to serve the purpose of rendering domestic aid to us here in the apartment. I would not be so callous as to bring a life into this world for the sole sake of easing such mundane tasks — I am not so irresponsible as to ignore the moral and ethical quandaries that presents, and such cruelty would, as I would hope I’ve proven, sicken me.”

My mind raced, trying to follow the line to where it was going to end, but none of the possibilities seemed reasonable. He had already proven that he wasn’t on M’s side, and what would be the point of M kidnapping Renée if they were allies anyway, but leaving Flamel here? For that matter, he didn’t display any of the signs I’d come to associate with the Servants twisted by M’s hypnosis. He was too clear-headed.

So what could he be talking about?

“Wait a minute!” Romani shoved himself into frame, shouting at the camera. “You’re not saying what I think you’re saying, are you? Nicolas Flamel! Are you insane? How irresponsible could you possibly be?”

“Romani!” Marie snarled, trying to push him back. He stubbornly clung to his place. “Get a hold of yourself!”

“It seemed to me the best option available,” Flamel admitted. “Hiding something so valuable in something so obvious as a safe or some sort of box would only invite the enemy to steal it, however well-protected I might try to make it. Hiding it on my person risked it being lost in battle or the enemy twisting my mind to deliver it to them. Then, where was the best place to hide the most valuable treasure in the world, but inside the body of what many would consider the most disposable tool a magus could possess?”

Wait. Was he saying…?

“You absolute madman,” Emiya said, stunned, having apparently come to the same conclusion I had.

“The Philosopher’s Stone,” Ritsuka whispered. “You hid it inside of Renée!”

“What?” Marie shrieked.

Flamel gave a solemn nod.

“That’s…”

“Cruel,” said Rika, something like betrayal on her face. “Abe, you made Renée just so you could hide the Stone? Haven’t you ever heard of the Mirror of Erised?”

“Rika,” her brother began wearily.

“It worked for Dumbledore, didn’t it?” Rika demanded.

“Dumbledore didn’t have to make the Mirror from scratch!” Ritsuka pointed out. Rika opened her mouth to argue, but couldn’t seem to find a hole in his logic and had to close her mouth, thwarted.

“Gramps,” said Mordred, her voice trembling a little as she spoke, “you telling me that you made that psycho maid just so you could hide your fancy doohickey?”

Flamel’s head drooped, and he stared downwards as he slowly wrung his hands, as though he could squeeze the guilt out of his joints by doing so. “Please don’t misunderstand. It was a calculated decision, but it was not made with malice aforethought. Even we Servants summoned here were not aware of what would occur when this Singularity was corrected, only that it needed to be corrected.” He folded his hands together almost like he was praying. His fingers were shaking. “One way or another, I was certain Renée would outlive me. I made arrangements with Doctor Jekyll to see to her disposition, once everything was over.”

Mordred took a threatening step towards him and snarled, “Stop treating her like she’s a tool in whatever game you’re —”

Flamel surged out of his seat, and his voice rang out like thunder, rattling the gas lamps in their fittings. “DO NOT MISTAKE NECESSITY FOR APATHY!” He swung his hand as though cutting through some invisible substance, and his chair wobbled from the unrestrained force, even though he didn’t touch it. “I fully accept the cruelty of my choices, but at no point have I ever treated her as though she was any less than the daughter I…!”

The fire left him suddenly, and he sagged, dropping back into the chair with the entirety of his weight. The wood creaked beneath him, but he didn’t seem to notice as his head fell into his hand.

“I gave her everything I could,” he croaked, voice cracking. “The knowledge she would need to continue on, the alchemical skills to pursue magecraft, if she should choose to do so, and memories…memories of my dear Perenelle, so that she might have some semblance of an understanding of what it’s like to have a mother.”

“You gave her everything you could, except a father who could be there for her as she learned to live on her own,” Arash said, not unkindly.

To this, Flamel had no response. He didn’t even try to offer one.

No one else seemed to notice the miserable look on Fran’s face.

“Shit!” Mordred spun around, stalking across the parlor, and when she got to the other side, she stopped, running a hand through her hair. She seemed desperate to find an outlet, but none were presenting themselves, and I didn’t think she dared to leave and miss out on whatever decisions we might make without her. “Fucking…shit!”

“What a mess,” Emiya breathed.

It wasn’t pretty, but there was at least one issue that had to be addressed first and foremost.

“Is there a way to separate the Stone from Renée?” I asked Flamel.

“Not safely,” he answered quietly. “And even if it could be done without killing her outright, the Stone itself is what will ensure she could live a normal lifespan. Without it, she is as short-lived as any other homunculus.”

An ugly realization bloomed in my head. “That’s why M said she doesn’t need her alive.”

Flamel looked up, grim-faced. The wrinkles in his skin looked deeper and darker than they ever had before. “Yes. I don’t know how it is that she came to the conclusion that Renée is the one in possession of the Stone, but that she knows is almost a certainty. Her choice to target Renée in particular leaves very little room for doubt.”

“There’s no choice, then,” Marie said suddenly. “You have to rescue her.”

The twins and Mash both spun around to look at her, surprised. “Director Marie?”

“Don’t misunderstand me!” she snapped at them. “It’s not a question of wants or morality anymore, it’s a matter of strategic objectives! M already has access to a Holy Grail, and she’s using that to fuel a steam engine that can cover the entire city! A Philosopher’s Stone isn’t quite on the same level and doesn’t have the same breadth when it comes to utility, but it’s absolutely something that shouldn’t be in the enemy’s hands!”

And while Marie was selfish enough and pragmatic enough to tell us to abandon an ally to save our own skins, she wasn’t so callous as to tell us to kill someone — homunculus or not — just because it would be easier than saving them.

“Then it is all the more prudent for us to make haste and begin our assault upon the enemy’s stronghold,” said Jekyll.

I wasn’t the only one who turned to look at him askance, having caught the implication.

“You don’t intend to come with us.”

Into the fog that would kill him as surely and as quickly as it would me without my mask?

“In fact, that was exactly my intent,” Jekyll replied. He offered a lopsided smile. “You have not determined to leave Mister Tohsaka and Miss Alice behind again, have you? It would seem to me the wisest course of action when preparing oneself for a decisive battle against the enemy would be to marshall your forces in their entirety. Though I can lay no claim to great strategic genius, to leave important allies behind when they would be better placed upon the frontlines smacks of folly, to me.”

“You’re forgetting that you and I can’t go out into that fog without dying within a few minutes,” Tohsaka said bluntly.

“And you’re an ordinary human!” Marie agreed. “There’s nothing you could do to help!”

“I have forgotten no such thing,” Jekyll rebuked them both. He adjusted his glasses. “There are still several details of great import that I myself have allowed to remain secret between us, and it seems to me now that as we are all revealing all of the cards we have to play, concealing them is pointless, and even more so, counterproductive.”

“What are you trying to say, Doctor Jekyll?” asked Ritsuka.

“Abraham’s Noble Phantasm,” he said bluntly. “To my understanding, it could be used to reduce the reactivity of the fog that is smothering the city and render safe a section of space large enough for us to walk, can it not? In that case, Mister Tohsaka and I need not concern ourselves. We will be perfectly protected.”

It… Actually, yes, if I understood how it worked correctly, then it could be used that way. Not easily, but it was definitely possible.

“That might get pretty tiring without a Master to help him out,” Arash remarked.

Jekyll nodded. “Indeed it might. I suppose it is fortunate, then, that it is not a concern.”

Hold on.

“Doctor,” said Flamel, “are you sure?”

“I think the time has long since passed where I might sit about this apartment and wonder at your success,” Jekyll answered firmly. “I would like to see for myself the face of the person who has done this to the city so that I might know the villain in all of her terrible glory.”

So the reason Flamel was so hesitant to form a contract with us…

“I haven’t the fortune to possess these Command Spells that seem so vital to proper collaboration,” said Jekyll. He straightened, taking on an air of imperiousness. “Nonetheless, Abraham, consider this my first and only order to you as your Master, and give it therefore all due weight: deliver us all to M’s lair safely, so that we might confront the dastardly villain trying to destroy this city.”

Flamel inclined his head. “Of course, Master.”

A moment of silence passed, and then a chorus of several voices shouted at once.

“WHAT?”