

Chapter CXLIX: King of Steam

Over everything else, I didn't hear Mash shout the name of her Noble Phantasm or Emiya summon the Aias, but the fact that I could only feel a gentle gust of wind told me that — even if it sounded like the entire building was coming down — one of them had gotten in place in time to protect us. We were safe, or as safe as we could be.

For a long moment, however, all I could hear was the screech and the grind of a jet of compressed air battering away at our defenses. It deafened me, the same way the blast itself had blinded me to everything between that Helter Skelter and this room, and the steam itself was so full of magical energy that it was killing my bugs as the excess billowed out and filled up the whole hallway.

The seconds stretched, but eventually, the attack petered out. The steam, however, continued to creep through the building, and I was keenly aware what would happen to me if it was the same as the fog that was coating the city.

There would be no Flamel to reverse the damage this time. We were halfway across the city, and even carrying me as fast as he possibly could, I doubted Arash would get me back to the apartment in time.

My glasses had fallen off when I landed, and I felt around blindly for my mask as I called in the bugs I'd pushed out and into the corners of the room as a matter of courtesy to the others. My fingers found only carpet and the wood of chair legs.

A pair of small hands reached up from under me, lifting up and over my head, and then pulled a familiar fabric down over my face. When I could see again with my own eyes, I looked down at Jackie through my mask's lenses and met her own eyes, made softer by the muted colors that filtered in. Something like concern marred her face.

A wave of gratitude washed through me.

"Is Mommy okay?" she asked.

I should be asking you that, I thought. But if I had made it through that unscathed, then a Servant like Jackie probably wouldn't have even felt it.

"Yes."

As I climbed back to my feet, the others were doing the same, and the barrier of Lord Chaldea flickered and faded. Mash huffed out a heavy breath, like she'd been holding it in the entire time.

"W-what the heck?" Rika asked into the deafening silence. "Who even does that?"

Jeanne Alter unsheathed her sword and turned to the ruined doorway, where the entire wall had been ripped away by the blast. "Somebody who *really* wants to fucking die!"

Mordred materialized her own sword and snarled, "Get in line!"

“I-it’s another Helter Skelter,” said Mash.

“So?” Mordred snapped.

“Only this one is...different.”

Mordred sent her a dangerous, wide-eyed glare. “So?”

“So,” I said calmly, “it just used a Noble Phantasm.”

Ritsuka caught on first, straightening with a look of alarm. “Which means it’s —”

“LISTEN!” a voice suddenly boomed, vibrating through the floor and shaking the walls. In the hallway beyond, the Helter Skelter spewed steam from the vents underneath its plates and took lumbering steps towards us. “Listen well, interlopers! I am the King of Steam! I am he who returned from beyond death to create this world of my fantasies! I am he who has returned in this era to grasp the future that I was once denied!”

“Sure likes to hear himself talk, doesn’t he?” muttered Emiya.

“Shush!” Rika hissed at him. “He’s monologuing!”

For this, I was going to agree with Rika. There was still too much information we were missing, and if letting this guy talk was going to get it for us, then we could afford to lend him our ears until he got violent again. If we were lucky, he might spill everything, and just like that, we would have all of the enemy’s secrets and plans laid bare.

“Let him,” I told everyone. It got me a few looks from Mordred and Jeanne Alter, but although no one relaxed, no one jumped into the fight either.

“The world I once imagined has lived on inside of me, realized,” the Helter Skelter, who could only be Babbage himself, continued, “but it is not enough. It is not nearly enough. Behold my greed, for I continue to desire more. Behold my tenacity, for I struggle and toil even beyond the grave. Behold my idealized form, clad in the steel of my resolve. Behold, and make peace with God, for you shall soon be with Him.”

“The fuck we will!” said Mordred, taking a threatening step forward.

More steam shot out from underneath the Helter Skelter’s faceplates. The red lens that formed the central eye focused on us as he came closer. “You, interlopers from the proper course of history. You rabble who would deny me. I know your purpose here. I know your goals. If you would seek to undo this world of steam, then you need to destroy the mastermind responsible — in that case, you need look no further. I am the one that Victor called ‘B.’ I am Charles Babbage, and I will make the world of my dreams reality.”

The closer he got, the more his presence stood out, and when I narrowed my focus upon him, his name and his abilities unfolded in my mind’s eye. Charles Babbage, Caster Class Servant, with...the highest strength and constitution stats I’d ever seen on a Caster.

Modifiers? Two of them on three different stats? The only place I'd seen something like that before was *Asterios*.

"Uhn!" Fran stepped forward, but Mordred threw out an arm to stop her from running straight to Babbage. "Ah, uhn, uh-uhn, uhn!"

"Yes!" Mash agreed. "Professor Babbage, you understand what you're doing, don't you? What this Singularity is and what it means!"

Another burst of steam. Quieter, Babbage said, "You are... Victor's daughter, are you not? His finest creation, craving a love he refused you. Yes, I... I understand well. That this dream of mine, it comes at the expense of mankind's future. The incineration of humanity..."

"Uhn!" Fran said urgently. "Ah, uh, uhn, ah, ah, uhn!"

"Seriously!" Rika seethed under her breath. "How many does this make it? Is it just going to be me and Tohsaka by the end of it?"

"Fucking *right*?" Jeanne Alter agreed.

"I know," said Babbage. "What happened to Victor... it was a tragedy, but a necessity. He should have understood... No, no, of course he understood. Scholars such as us exist for the sake of humanity, for our dreams shape the future. We have a responsibility to those yet unborn and the generations to come. That is why he... why he had to..."

He trailed off. For several long seconds, he was silent. Jeanne Alter and Mordred, both of whom had remained at the ready for the fight, shared a bewildered look with each other, and then with Ritsuka, who could only shake his head, equally as confused.

Arash? I asked.

Here, he replied. I'm ready the second he makes a move, but I'm not sure how well my arrows will do against that armor.

I wasn't sure either. Arash's arrows were powerful, could shatter stone as easily as they pierced flesh, and had been strong enough to punch through the scales of the wyverns in Orléans. Babbage, however, had clad himself in his Noble Phantasm, and whether it was a suit of armor he was wearing or if he was like some Victorian version of Dragon, the end result still left him with a lot more defensive power just by virtue of that alone.

"Did he have to die?" Babbage asked, and if it wasn't for the echoing, reverberating quality his armor gave it, I wasn't sure we would have heard him. "No, no, of course Victor had to die, he was... standing in the way of my dream. Yes, and that was why... But why would Victor stand against me? He, best of all of us, should have understood the importance of our work. What it means for the future."

"Is he... talking to himself?" Jeanne Alter asked.

"We think something's wrong with him," Jackie said.

There was. B and M were supposed to be the masterminds behind this whole thing, but it seemed like my earlier thought was being proven out: the idea for this fog may have been Babbage's, but the mysterious M, whose identity we still didn't know, was the one who brainwashed him into going through with it. I was looking at a victim of Mastering who didn't have any of the protocols the PRT had come up with to fall back on to pull himself out of it, however flimsy they might have been in practice.

"Professor Babbage," I began, trying to strike the difficult balance between firm and gentle, "there *is* no future anymore. Your Project Demonic Fog is helping to destroy it."

"No," Babbage said immediately, "no, that can't be right, I... But it has to be. A dimension of steam that covers the entire world, there...can be only one result. Yes, and I...I have to see it. I *need* to see it. To make it a reality. Even if it costs... Even if it..."

"Uhn!" Fran protested. "Ah, ah, uhn, uh-ah, uhn!"

"Yes, I...I am an inventor," Babbage agreed. "I create...for the good of mankind. To further a path...into the future. My dream is... No, no, personal ambitions cannot...*cannot* trump the importance of the e-end goal! H-h-history has a-already determined that...the w-world I envisioned was not...n-not the correct path! M-my dream...can only ever be a dream!"

He lifted his massive mace.

"Shit!" Mordred cursed and made to leap forward.

But with a crash, Babbage slammed it into the wall, smashing the wooden boards and sending splinters pinging off the surface of his armor. And then again, and again. The whole palace seemed to shake under the strength of each one.

"H-h-how dare you!" Although the faceplate of the Helter Skelter had no mouth, the snarl was audible in his voice. "How dare you! T-t-to use my Angrboða against me in this fashion! To use my d-d-dream against me! To t-t-twist my mind towards your c-cruel ambitions! E-e-even now, I feel your f-fingers intruding upon my thoughts, *M!* Y-y-you have even stolen your t-true name from my lips! *I am not a toy you can wind up and play with to your heart's content!*"

With a final slam, he left his mace stuck in the demolished section of the wall.

"L-listen, interlopers!" Babbage said. "There is not...not much time! The source of this mist...the k-keystone for Project Demonic Fog, my Angrboða, you will find it deep...deep under... under... u-under..."

He fell silent, and for a long moment, said nothing more. Like a machine that had been powered down, a robot whose batteries had run out suddenly.

But unless his legend had changed his nature so drastically — not an impossibility, I had to admit, not when faced with all of the other Servants I had yet met and how their own legends had changed them — he was neither of those, he was a Heroic Spirit. A Servant. And Servants didn't simply shut down when they ran out of power, they disappeared. When none of us had done anything to bind him or stop him, there was only one thing that could force him to stop for no apparent reason.

A Command Spell.

“Okay,” said Mordred, “what the fuck is happening now?”

“He’s rebooting,” Jeanne Alter drawled, “what’s it look like?”

“Fuck you,” Mordred snapped back.

“No,” said Ritsuka, looking disturbed, “that’s not what’s happening at all.”

Mash chanced a glance back over her shoulder. “Master?”

“M just hit his shutoff switch,” Rika said grimly. “Get ready, Cinnabon. I think the Big Bad’s about to assume direct control.”

Mash’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“Mash!” shouted Ritsuka.

Mash’s head whipped back around, just in time for her to shove her shield up to protect her face as Babbage’s massive metal fist swung for her head. The echoing metallic *bong* was loud, discordant, and set my teeth on edge, and Mash slid back several feet from the force of the blow. A burst of steam hissed out from the Helter Skelter’s armor plates.

“P-Professor Babbage!” Mash gasped.

“Uhn!” Fran tried. “Ah, ah, uhn!”

“It’s no use, Fran!” said Mordred. She kicked off the floor and raced towards Babbage, flying past Mash with her sword raised. “That’s not Babbage anymore!”

The *clang* of her sword striking the armor and bouncing off was just as loud in so confined a space, and Babbage responded by ripping his giant mace free of the wall and swinging it around at her without a care for the damage he was doing to the building. Somehow, Mordred managed to dodge it, but only by a hair’s breadth.

“Uhn?”

“Command Spell,” Emiya said with a grimace. “Looks like M got tired of letting Babbage talk and decided to shut him up before he could give too much away.”

“Uhn!”

It may have been cruel, but from a pragmatic point of view, it was the only option he had for keeping us from finding out more. If your coalition depended entirely on you controlling your minions, then when that control started to slip, the only thing you could do was apply a stronger method.

I hated what it reminded me of. After all, I’d done something similar. When the capes I was controlling during Gold Morning started to stroke out from the stress of my control, I’d pulled in

Canary to pacify them. The principle was the same — and no less ugly now that someone else was using it, no matter their end goal.

“So it’s just like Paracelsus,” said Ritsuka. “The only thing left we can do for him is…”

Put him out of his misery.

“Yes.”

Fran let out a plaintive moan.

“Shit.” Jeanne Alter’s grin belied her words. “Well, if we’ve got no other choice!”

“Try not to bring the building down around us,” said Emiya as he materialized his swords at last.

“No promises!”

As Babbage lurched back into motion, Emiya, Jeanne Alter, and Mordred all leapt towards him to engage, and us Masters could do nothing except retreat as far into the room and away from the action as we could. It was too crowded for us to do anything else, to try something as ordinary as a Gandr shot that I already knew wouldn’t have hurt Babbage anyway.

Even if the table in the center hadn’t taken up a good portion of the room, the space was cramped. A fight between humans could have happened there, but a fight between capes wouldn’t have worked so well, let alone a fight between Servants.

What followed was the strangest Servant fight I’d yet seen. As was befitting of that huge, clunky armor, Babbage was fairly slow, and although he had enough agility to swing his massive mace around and respond to attacks, he only really had speed in short bursts. That didn’t matter so much when his armor was so thick, because even Mordred’s prodigious strength wasn’t leaving much behind except scratches and shallow dents, and those didn’t slow him down at all.

Of course, that also meant that Jeanne Alter and Emiya weren’t doing much damage either. Their swings didn’t even hit as hard as Mordred’s so they might as well have been swinging butterknives at Babbage for all the effect they were having. Arash’s arrows didn’t fare any better, because they mostly just bounced off.

Babbage also didn’t *need* to be that fast. When the entire place was so small, there was almost no room for any of our Servants to maneuver. Mordred and Jeanne Alter could dive in at the same time and attack from opposite angles, but Emiya couldn’t squeeze in between them, and there was barely enough space for Arash to aim for what should have been the vulnerable joints and gaps in the armor plating.

But Babbage had a third advantage. Namely, he could swing and miss all he liked without a care in the world for how much damage he was doing to the structure of the building around us, because it didn’t matter to him if the roof came down on top of him. Even if he was buried alive, he wasn’t really alive, so he could just go into spirit form and phase through the rubble to escape.

Us Masters, of course, didn't have the luxury. If the palace collapsed on top of us, then there was a good chance we'd either get injured or die.

"Mommy?" Jackie asked.

"Stay with me, Jackie," I murmured to her. Louder, I said, "Retreat!"

Several heads turned my way. "Senpai?" Rika asked, confused.

"We need to take this outside," I told her bluntly. "Jeanne Alter, Mordred, Arash, cover us!"

"The fuck?" Mordred grunted. She took a heavy blow on the flat of her sword, distracted for a split second by the order, and was knocked back for the effort.

Ritsuka, who seemed to have caught on, said, "Mash, you, too!"

"Ah, crap!" said Rika. "Emiya!"

"Got it!" Emiya said.

I took Jackie by the hand and turned around, then led her to the opposite end of the room from Babbage and through the leftmost door that would take us on the shortest route back outside. The twins and Fran were hot on my heels, with Mash not far behind us, covering our retreat as the others slowly gave ground to Babbage and led him in our direction.

The eerie part was the fact that he didn't make a sound, but for the movements of his armor. No shouting, no cursing, no promises of retribution or violence. Just a calm, implacable machine, dead set on murdering us.

In that regard, he reminded me of Leviathan. It wasn't a comfortable thought.

I gave a moment of consideration to the large room halfway down the other end of the building that had to be where one or both Houses of Parliament met, but even if it was much bigger than the dining room we'd just left, it didn't have enough room that I would be comfortable with anyone firing off a Noble Phantasm inside of it without endangering our lives. Outside was safer. No ceiling to fall down on our heads, no walls to collapse and bury us.

Through the hallways, I led our group, keeping track of everything as best I could to make sure Babbage was following and wasn't gearing up for another use of his Noble Phantasm. He made it harder with his armor. Every now and again, bursts of pressurized steam would jet out of vents hidden beneath the plates and just above the joints, and any bugs caught in them were flash-fried and expelled. My swarm had already been tiny by comparison to my usual numbers, and I was losing what little I had to send against him before I could explore his suit enough to figure out a weakness.

Mostly, it seemed that it didn't really have any. It was, after all, essentially the same as the other Helter Skelter, it was just of a much higher quality. It shared the same vulnerabilities, except I was dead sure that my Last Resort would be just shy of useless in cutting the mechanisms that controlled the arms.

Marie and Da Vinci had said that the Helter Skelter were both the product and manifestation of a Heroic Spirit's Noble Phantasm — Babbage's Noble Phantasm. I figured it was safe to assume that his armor was the same, and if it was even sturdier than the high spec Helter Skelter we'd found outside, then it was going to take a lot to get through it.

Last time, it had taken two Noble Phantasms to put it down, although Mordred's might have been enough on its own. It was probably a good idea to give Jeanne Alter and Mordred a break to recover their energy, so that only left a couple of options, and if M was paying enough attention to what was going on to use a Command Spell to stop Babbage from talking, then there were still a few secret weapons we should probably keep secret from him.

"Emiya!" I called back as I ran. "The instant you have a clear shot —" What was the incantation he'd used again? Right. "— twist your core in madness!"

I could practically hear Emiya's neck crack from how quickly his head spun. "What? Master —"

"You," Rika said between breaths, "heard her! Senpai has...a plan!"

We came upon the last stretch of hallway and raced down it to the echo of our footsteps on the tile and the rumble of Babbage barreling through everything in his way, splintering doors and tearing chunks of stone out of the walls. I had a stray thought about having to pay for the damages to the UK government, and what Marie might have said when she got the bill.

It probably wouldn't have been pretty or calm.

The doors that led outside loomed ahead of us, and I realized suddenly as I ran that we couldn't afford to slow down to open them normally. Babbage might not have been fast over long distances or turns, but he was still fast enough to chase down ordinary humans if we gave him enough of a chance.

Jackie, I thought at her, the doors!

"Yes, Mommy!"

I let her pull her hand free of mine, and faster than I could ever hope to be, she sped over to the doors at the end of the hallway. She didn't even bother opening them the way I'd intended for her to; instead, she pulled out her knives and slashed the hinges like they were made of butter, to the sound of a horrific metallic shriek, and then hit the wood hard enough to send them flying outwards and onto the pavement outside.

Good job! I praised her.

Her smile lit up her face.

Because she had opened the way, we didn't slow down at the doorway and ran straight through it and out into the open, into the fog. The burn of my magic circuits from the dense energy in the air joined the burn of my muscles from the run, but it was easily ignored, and we kept going, across the sidewalk and out towards the street. The twins followed my lead.

It was only once we were clear enough of the building to avoid any falling debris that I came to a stop and spun around. The twins were a little startled at the suddenness of it, but came up beside me and turned, too, with Fran in tow. Our Servants followed us out, still taking potshots at Babbage, still firing ineffective arrows in the case of Emiya and Arash, but they had to break off when Babbage himself stopped just shy of coming through the doorway.

“Shit,” said Mordred as she settled herself defensively in front of Mash. “Think he’s onto us? Or did that M bastard order him to defend that place?”

“The fuck do you think?” Jeanne Alter said. “That son of a bitch isn’t stupid enough to think we’d just leave things be because his wind-up toy doesn’t leave the fucking building. He’s up to something.”

“Uh-uh-uhn,” Fran suggested.

“Maybe,” I allowed, although I personally doubted it. Babbage had no Magic Resistance whatsoever, and he wasn’t particularly famous for his indomitable will, the way some heroes were. There was only so much he could do to fight a Command Spell.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think that’s it at all,” Arash said grimly.

“Emiya?” I said.

Emiya let out a breath almost like a sigh, then shifted his stance and held out a hand. Above his palm, the wireframe structure of a sword took shape, then slowly filled in, gaining detail, color, and form. A blue-wrapped hilt, a golden guard, a blade that spiraled towards its point like a drill. When it had finished, he gripped it by the pommel and set it along the string of his bow.

“Wait!” said Rika. “He’s doing something!”

In the shadow of the doorway, Babbage lifted his mace again, and I thought for a fraction of a second that he was going to smash the entrance of the building, as though it could slow him down if he really wanted to follow us out. For that fraction of a second, I entertained the possibility that Fran was right and he really was fighting back against M’s orders.

That went right out the window when he pointed the head in our direction and an ominous glow began to shine through the hollowed barrel that went down the length of the thing.

Shit.

And between the fog drifting into the building and the intense concentration of magical energy gathering, I couldn’t even try something like clogging up the barrel with my bugs.

“Mash!” Ritsuka said urgently, preempting me.

“Yes, Master!”

She rushed to the head of the group, past Mordred and Jeanne Alter, and planted her shield in front of her.

“Lord Chaldeas!”

The familiar rampart formed as a barrier in front of the shield — just in time for another hurricane to slam into it with enough strength to rip apart the pavement in its way. A vortex of swirling steam stretched back, connecting Lord Chaldeas to that narrow barrel in Babbage’s mace, and it howled as it tried to grind away at the barrier and consume us.

Lord Chaldeas had weathered worse, however, from stronger, more intimidating Heroic Spirits. Attila the Hun and her impossible sword hadn’t been able to break through it without effort, and to date, she was the only one I’d seen who had been able to do it. Babbage’s Noble Phantasm was never going to be strong enough to compare to that. The only thing that managed to reach us was a stiff breeze.

In the space between the start and the end, Emiya drew back on his bowstring. The sword set there streamlined and narrowed until it resembled an undulating arrow.

“My core is twisted in madness,” he muttered like a prayer.

The swirling vortex of steam petered out and slowly died, and once it had dissipated, so too did Lord Chaldeas. Babbage didn’t even have a moment to try anything else — the instant the barrier disappeared, Emiya barked, “Caladbolg!” and the arrow leapt from his bow with a burst of wind that blew my hair back.

There was no travel time. To me, it seemed like the arrow left the bow and slammed into Babbage in the same moment, detonating like a bomb. A massive explosion rocked the building, shook the ground beneath our feet, and swallowed up the entire front of the palace in front of us in a bright, blue blaze. Every bug that I had left in that range abruptly vanished, too quickly to even feel the heat of the blast that killed them.

The boom echoed an instant after Caladbolg detonated, and Rika squealed as the backlash washed over us, whipping my hair about, and if it hadn’t been for my mask, biting at my skin. I still felt it on my bare hands.

As the light faded, the extent of the damage done was revealed, and if Mordred had shaved off a large chunk of the upper floors when she destroyed the high spec Helter Skelter earlier, then Caladbolg had carved out a section three or four times the size and left a crater behind to match. The entire front of the building six hallways wide and three deep had been obliterated, including the room where we’d been eating our snacks not that long ago.

I realized suddenly that Emiya probably could have obliterated Flauros on his own with something like this, if only it wouldn’t have caught us in the crossfire. He must have planned for Caladbolg to go through Flauros’ flesh so that the building behind him could act as a backstop and Flauros’ bulk would protect us from the blast, it just hadn’t worked the way he’d intended at the time.

At the center of the devastation was Babbage, or rather what was left of him. The entirety of the right arm had been seared away, taking with it both his mace and a large chunk of the head, right leg, and the chest plate. Much of the head itself was still red hot and almost molten, with the edges wavy and melted, and the entire right half of the “skirt” that hung down over the upper legs was just gone.

A liquid of some kind was flowing freely down the side that had been so badly damaged. It was hard to tell whether it was blood or oil or some mixture of both.

“Uhn,” Fran said mournfully.

“Holy cow,” said Rika. “He actually survived that? Where can I get me some armor like that?”

“Shit, that guy’s fucking durable,” Mordred agreed.

“I-i-interlopers,” Babbage stuttered out, and it fluctuated with each syllable, like his speaker system was failing. The red eye at the center of his head flickered. “Listen...l-listen carefully. My Massive Steam Engine Angrboða...u-utilizes the Holy Grail as a p-power source. If you w-w-wish to right this twisted world, y-you must...must *destroy* it, before it spreads b-beyond the city. You will find it...deep u-undergr —”

There was no warning. Mid-sentence, as he was about to tell us the secret location of his machine, he suddenly exploded in a spectacular flash of light, sound, and heat. Bits and pieces of his armor flew in every direction, and I threw up my hands to protect my face as Rika squeaked and Ritsuka gave a shout of alarm.

But Arash interposed himself between me and the blast as Emiya did the same for Rika and Mash raised her shield to protect both of the twins as best as she could. Mordred put herself in front of Fran for the same reason.

It was over fast, but the echo of the shockwave rang in my ears for several long seconds afterwards.

“Anyone hurt?” I asked.

“U-uhn!” said Fran.

“I-I’m okay!” Rika said. “J-just, uh, w-waiting for my soul to catch up with my body!”

“Same, Senpai!” her brother added.

From her place between me and Arash, Jackie piped up with, “We’re okay, Mommy.”

“Thank goodness!” said Mash.

And since the Servants all seemed fine, too, that meant that no one had been hurt by the explosion. Only, it seemed, Babbage, who was nowhere to be seen when I peered past Arash to the spot where he’d been a moment ago. There didn’t even seem to be shards of his armor laying around. They would have disappeared when he did.

I wondered if the other Helter Skelter had vanished, too, and I wasn’t sure if I wanted them to. It ruined the plan to track them back to their base, a plan that might have gone up in smoke with Babbage just a second ago anyway, since their creator would no longer be around to do maintenance in the first place.

“Damn,” said Jeanne Alter, “what a sore loser. Fucker blew himself up instead of going quietly.”

“I don’t think that was it at all,” Emiya told her grimly.

“No,” I agreed, “it wasn’t.”

It was too convenient that he would self-destruct just as he was about to reveal the location of Angrboða, and there was only one person who benefited from it. So, just like he had earlier when he used a Command Spell to force Babbage to attack us to keep him from telling us the same thing he had just been about to, M had used another Command Spell to force Babbage to commit suicide. By detonating whatever his suit had used as a power source? That was my guess. It was the only explanation I had for the sudden explosion.

“M, again,” Ritsuka said darkly.

“Uhn,” Fran growled.

“Think so?” Mordred asked. She didn’t sound surprised or skeptical.

“In a normal Holy Grail War, it was the intended purpose of Command Spells in the first place,” Emiya revealed. “That is, to force your Servant to commit suicide at the end once the rest of the competitors had been eliminated. This wouldn’t be the first time a Master has used Command Spells for that purpose, and it won’t be the last. It’s just the first time you guys have had to see it.”

Deliberately, I didn’t mention that I had hoarded my Command Spells for just that purpose with some of our more dangerous Servants I hadn’t been sure we could trust — one of them was right there with us.

“That’s fucked up,” said Jeanne Alter.

Mordred glanced meaningfully at Jackie, who didn’t seem to notice.

“At least he’s gone, though, right?” said Rika. “I mean, for Command Spells to work, you have to have a contract between a Master and Servant, right? So if he has the Grail, M can just print Command Spells and use them to force Babbage to do whatever he wanted. It’s sad that things had to go this way, but it wasn’t like we had a choice, did we?”

She sounded like she was trying to convince herself as much as she was anyone else.

“Uh-uhn, ah, uhn,” Fran mumbled.

Rika wasn’t wrong, though. There really wasn’t much else we could have done. Without Medea and her Rule Breaker, we had no way of breaking his contract with M and saving him from being forced to do M’s bidding. In that sense, yeah, putting him out of his misery was the only viable option we really had. If we had tried to let him go, it would have just meant having to face him again later.

That probably wasn’t much comfort to Fran, though, and while it meant we were down another of the enemy masterminds, we’d also lost a source of information about exactly what was going on here. The information about Angrboða was useful, and the things implied about M in the way Babbage talked weren’t nothing, but the most important part was something that we still hadn’t gotten.

Deep under. I thought he was about to say “deep underground,” but he might have been trying to tell us “deep in the Underground,” because that *did* exist in this era. Not as extensively as it would later, but it was still there, and still extensive enough that it would take a lot of time to comb the entirety of it for clues.

“So what now?” said Jeanne Alter. “Now that the tin can is out of the way, that just leaves the last guy, right? The head honcho himself? Chief motherfucker of this whole shebang?”

Fran glowered at her, no doubt upset about how callously Jeanne Alter was treating the issue of Babbage.

“For now,” I said, “we head back to the apartment. Decompress, eat some dinner, let Jekyll and the others know what happened here and what we found out. After that...”

We didn’t necessarily *have* to search the whole Underground, though. We had a few other clues that would help us narrow down where to look, particularly since a machine that was powered by the Holy Grail would be letting out a lot of energy. The fact that something like that wasn’t even a blip on Chaldea’s sensors told us that there were really only a few places it could be, and conveniently, we’d already been planning to look in those places. We just now knew to look *under* the streets instead of in the buildings on top of them.

“We plan out how we’re going to track M down so we can stop him from expanding this Singularity.” I turned to Fran. “And we’ll make him answer for what he did to Babbage, too.”

Her mouth set into a grim, determined line, and she nodded. “Uhn!”