

## Chapter CXL: Merits of Mercy

“You’re sure about that?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking.

“Positive,” Ritsuka answered. “I checked with Master’s Clairvoyance before he teleported away — Caster class Servant, Paracelsus von Hohenheim.”

“I was too busy barfing, so I can’t say for sure,” Rika added unnecessarily.

“Troubling,” Caster said, frowning. “I had feared it might be the case, but some part of me had hoped I was wrong.”

“Do you know him, Abraham?” Mash asked.

Caster gave a small shake of his head. “By reputation only. In terms of history, he and I were separated by nearly a hundred years, so I never had the...pleasure of making his personal acquaintance.”

I had to admit, I wasn’t sure what to make of it yet. I’d been so sure of my conclusion before, but — come to think of it, Paracelsus had died young, hadn’t he? I’d forgotten about that until now. He’d never made it to fifty, let alone the sixty-ish look of Caster, so my original conclusion had been flawed from the start.

But if that was the case, if Caster wasn’t Paracelsus at all and the real Paracelsus was already confirmed to be on the enemy’s side, then who *was* Caster?

“Did you admire him?” Ritsuka asked.

Caster grimaced. “I’m afraid not. He was...something of a radical, you might say, and while I can applaud his motivations and even his goals, his methods were...a little too thoughtless.”

Tohsaka cleared his throat. “If it’s not too much trouble, perhaps someone might explain who this Paracelsus person is for those of us who know nothing about him at all?”

Ritsuka shook his head. “I don’t really know much about him either.”

“Ditto,” said Rika. “I know *a* Von Hohenheim, but something tells me this ain’t the same guy. They don’t look the same, for one thing.”

How had Marie put it when she was explaining this guy to me?

“He’s the father of modern alchemy.” And didn’t *that* do interesting things to Caster’s face? “He standardized the system used by almost all alchemists since, and he created the mystic code known to modern magi as the Azoth Sword. You might call him a genius.”

Rika sighed. “Senpai gave really short exposition again.”

What, was she expecting me to give them his life’s story? I only knew the most important parts to begin with.

“There isn’t much else to say, Senpai,” said Mash. “Paracelsus von Hohenheim is credited with numerous advances in medicine, particularly in the field of toxicology, and magi knew him as a talented alchemist. He spent quite some time abroad in Europe, and he was a physician for a while, but in terms of his impact on history, that...wasn’t quite as important.”

I remembered there being a rumor about the philosopher’s stone, but if it had ever been confirmed, Marie hadn’t known, or at least hadn’t said. It wasn’t like he would have been the only alchemist in history rumored to have made one, but the fact he’d died so young made me think it was less than likely.

“Now that we are certain he is in play,” said Caster, “it would be fairly safe to assume that the grotesque homunculi we have seen about the city are his creations, although what in the world would possess him to do such a thing — or, indeed, to participate in this travesty — I cannot even begin to speculate.”

“I can,” Mash said quietly. Her lips drew into a tight line and her eyes fell. “We’ve encountered this sort of thing before, remember, Senpai? Miss Taylor? Back in Fuyuki, and even in the previous Singularity, Okeanos, normally just and righteous Heroic Spirits doing things that no one would ever believe they would do.”

Ah.

“You think there’s another Demon God involved.”

Mash didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

She was probably right. We’d had exactly this sort of discussion once before, about King Solomon, and while a man said to have brought seventy-two demons to heel being corrupted by anything else felt a little bit like a stretch, the principle was the same. Medea the younger from the last Singularity and the altered Servants from Fuyuki proved that it was very possible.

“It...makes sense, doesn’t it?” Ritsuka said a little uncertainly. “Back in Fuyuki and Septem, there was Professor Lev — Flauros — and in Okeanos, another Demon God, Forneus, that the other Medea summoned using the Grail...”

That left Orléans as the outlier, but if Flauros had been punished as he claimed he was for our success there, then it was safe to assume the only reason we hadn’t run into one was because it was in another Singularity. It left the question of whether or not Forneus had been responsible for more than one, though, but Singularities weren’t linear. The time between them wasn’t fixed or set. Forneus could have been *here* before showing up *there*.

Having said that...

“It might be better to assume we’re going to encounter one before the end of this.”

“And it’s the one responsible for corrupting Paracelsus,” Ritsuka concluded.

“Most likely.” On the subject of him, “You said he *teleported* away?”

Ritsuka nodded. “Yeah. It’s... All things considered, we didn’t think anything like that was possible without using the Grail, so that means we can be sure of it now, right? P, B, and M have it.”

“Or a Command Spell!” Rika interjected. “Which, okay, whoever’s got him on speed dial is getting that from the Grail anyway, so I guess it’s all the same.”

“Even for a Caster of his caliber, teleportation would be a mystery well beyond him,” Caster supplied helpfully. “Yes, it would be safe to assume that — however it was accomplished — whatever form of spatial transference he used would have involved the Holy Grail in some form or fashion.”

Tohsaka twitched. “What did he look like?”

“A dreamboat,” Rika answered immediately.

Ritsuka grimaced, then offered a more coherent answer. “Tall, lean, middle-aged. He had long black hair, no beard, and he wore a white robe.”

“As *bishounen* as *bishounen* gets!” Rika added.

I looked at Ritsuka, and he sighed. “It means ‘pretty boy.’”

Tohsaka, on the other hand, heaved out a sigh of relief. It occurred to me, suddenly, that teleportation was technically covered under the umbrella of the Second True Magic, so he might have been afraid that his mentor was working with the enemy for some reason. That wasn’t impossible, I suppose, but not something he should have been worried about when Ritsuka already confirmed his identity with Master’s Clairvoyance.

On the other hand, I thought, rubbing my thumb across Jackie’s shoulder, it wasn’t like we hadn’t already gotten plenty of proof that our clairvoyance wasn’t foolproof. I was more inclined to believe that the guy they encountered was the real deal, though.

“If Paracelsus is the one responsible for the homunculi,” Mash said, “that means that B and M have to be the ones making the other things, don’t they? The Helter Skelter and automata.”

“One would assume,” said Caster. “Whatever else he was, Paracelsus was not a... I believe the modern term is engineer. That is, he had no talent for inventing mechanical devices.”

“Close enough.”

“It is not impossible that the automata and the Helter Skelter have the same origin,” Caster went on, “but they have different... design principles, shall we say. They are constructed in vastly different configurations using quite different mechanisms. I think it safe to assume that their creators are different people as well.”

“Maybe,” I allowed. Probably, even. People tended to fall into patterns once they got comfortable with a certain way of doing things, and even someone smart enough to not only build, but mass produce fully functioning robots was not an exception to that. Two different designs likely did mean two different designers.

But it might be dangerous to assume that B or M didn't have something else up their sleeves, even before we started talking about potential Demon Gods running around.

“Hey!” Mordred's voice called from behind the twins and out of sight. “You guys done yapping yet? My ass is getting sore from sitting around doing nothing!”

The twins grimaced and turned back to me. “We'll talk more once you get back,” I assured them. “For now —”

I closed my eyes for a moment, pushing my mind down the thread connecting me to Jeanne Alter, and I borrowed her sight, just long enough to see everyone, all of them, all healthy and uninjured. If they'd been hurt at all in the fighting, then the wounds had already been treated with First Aid.

“— keep an eye out on your way back. Just because you made it through that fight without getting hurt doesn't mean they won't try again.”

Ritsuka and Mash both nodded, faces resolute. “Right!”

“Hang on a second,” Rika said, “um, what are we supposed to do with maybe-not-Jack's body? I mean, I'm no undertaker, and the guy was a serial killer, sure, probably, maybe, kinda-sorta, but I feel all kinds of funny about just leaving him hanging around out here, you know?”

My lips pressed tight. If we were in a better spot and had more security, I honestly would have liked to have Da Vinci look into things and see how it was the enemy had managed to make what sounded like a Demi-Servant, but that wasn't really an option here. I certainly wasn't going to ask the twins to carry the corpse back with them, not if it was as badly damaged as they were implying it was, and as far as they'd come in the last few months, I didn't think they were ready for something like *that*.

But we couldn't leave it where the enemy could retrieve it, and that automatically meant tossing it into the Thames was out, too. There wasn't time for a proper burial — or a place for it, for that matter — which really only left one option.

“Burn it, and then make your way back here. Just be careful not to set the whole city on fire.”

None of them looked particularly comfortable with that idea, but none of them tried to argue against it either.

“I think I might have something for that,” Emiya's voice came from the background. “This wasn't what it was made for, and my copy is only a degraded shadow of the real deal, but it should be enough to burn a single body without doing any damage to the infrastructure.”

“As long as you don't ask me to light the matches,” Rika said, relieved.

“We'll handle things here and then come back right away, Senpai,” Ritsuka promised, although he naturally didn't sound very enthusiastic. “Please let everyone else know we'll be back in time for lunch.”

“Although whether we’re going to want to eat it is a different question,” Rika muttered. As though to punctuate that statement, the line cut, and their images disappeared.

“They’re gone,” Jackie said, mystified.

“We’ll see them again in about an hour,” I told her.

“Uhn?” Fran asked, peeking out of the study.

“Yes, it’s safe to come out now.”

“Uhn?”

“That was Ritsuka and Rika, yes,” I answered. “You heard them?”

She nodded. Good, it meant I didn’t need to explain things.

I turned to Caster. “Abraham…”

I wanted answers, but if it came down to forcing the issue, I wanted to have at least one Servant with high level magic resistance between us first, so I decided I was going to wait until Mash and Mordred had returned. Instead, I made a show of looking around the devastated parlor and the various structures jutting haphazardly out of every available surface.

“...you should probably get this place back in order before Jekyll comes out of his office.”

Caster grimaced. “Yes, I suppose I should, shouldn’t I?”

He pressed his hands together again, muttered another incantation, and before my eyes, everything that had happened in his short battle with Jackie was undone. Every jutting arm, every glassy spike, every broken piece of furniture, it all wound back like a clock in reverse. Splinters returned from whence they came, cushioning stuffed itself back through ripped fabric, and then the fabric itself was stitched back together until I couldn’t tell it had ever been ripped. Snapped legs reattached themselves without a hint of a seam, the bent fire poker straightened, and even the cracks in the walls and ceiling sealed over. The wallpaper reapplied itself as though it had never been torn.

Almost like an afterthought, the window Jackie had come in through and smashed repaired itself and was whole again, good as new. With that, it was like the fight had never happened in the first place.

I’m sure it would have wowed the twins — maybe not now, but earlier on for sure — but even though I couldn’t help being a little bit impressed, I had frankly seen more incredible things long before coming to Chaldea. Most of them hadn’t been quite so benign.

“Wow!” said Jackie.

But some of us were apparently more easily impressed. Tohsaka’s expression was carefully blank, and in some ways, that was as much an indication that he was impressed too as him shouting it would have been.

“Ahh...” Fran breathed, head swiveling to take it all in.

“Not my most inventive work, I’ll admit,” Caster said ruefully. “There is a certain advantage in speed for simple shape transformation, however, and it made for quite the easy cleanup, didn’t it? Frankly, I’ve never had to use my alchemy for combat before this deployment, so this is all rather new to me.”

He was doing a fairly decent job for someone who had never used magic in a fight before a few days ago. Whether it would carry over into larger scale combat in a larger room or outside, in a place where he hadn’t set up his workshop, that was a different question, and I guess only time would tell. A Shaker who could turn the entire battlefield into his weapon was the sort of thing that could control the outcome of a fight from start to finish.

But Tohu and Bohu were my standard for that, and I wasn’t sure that city-killing monsters were a fair comparison for someone a lot more human in scale.

“Mister Abraham is really smart,” Nursery Rhyme said with a smile.

Jackie nodded. “He sure is! He almost caught us before, too!”

Tohsaka’s cheek twitched. “Alright, am I the only one who’s going to bring it up?” he asked, jabbing a finger at Jackie. “Why are we keeping *that* around? It’s a serial killer, and an enemy Servant, too!”

“Papa!” Nursery Rhyme scolded him. “That’s a mean thing to say!”

Jackie scowled, pressing herself tighter against my hip.

“Now that you mention it...” Caster began meaningfully.

“*Was* an enemy,” said Arash. “Now that the contract is set, she’s an ally.”

“Do you really think so?” Tohsaka countered. “It was happy enough to try cutting us to ribbons fifteen minutes ago, and you think a few words and a little bit of wishful thinking is enough to make it our friend?”

“The fact that we *could* establish a contract means she was never properly brought onto the enemy’s side,” I said.

“So she was working for them because she wanted to instead?” Tohsaka shot back, interrupting me. “Because that definitely makes it better!”

“We just wanted to find our Mommy,” Jackie muttered.

“However they convinced her to follow their orders, the fact of the matter is that we’ve deprived them of a powerful ally,” I said calmly. “And frankly, if you think that she’s anywhere near the worst person I’ve ever worked with or fought alongside, then I’ll tell you that you must have lived a remarkably sheltered life.”

In terms of scale and sheer carnage, Bonesaw made Jackie look like an angel, and by the end of things, she'd turned herself around — or at least been in the process of it — and I had nearly trusted the girl who had attempted to play Frankenstein with my brain to actually play Frankenstein with my brain. Only nearly, because Panacea had been there to do it quicker, easier, and cleaner.

“That’s a poor excuse for using someone like her to assuage your guilty conscience,” Andersen interjected. He stepped out of the study as though he’d just come from the other room, but he underestimated my bugs, because I knew he’d only just materialized.

Whether he’d been watching everything in spirit form or not, I couldn’t say, but I was willing to bet I knew the answer anyway.

“I shouldn’t need to tell you that sparing her won’t change what you’ve already done in the past,” he went on callously. “You’re not stupid enough to believe that you can erase that sin by adopting a child that has already died and been forsaken. Nothing can fix the things that were broken a long time ago.”

*Human Observation A.* I’d forgotten he had that skill. I guess I should just have been thankful that it wasn’t a higher rank, or else he might have managed to read my whole life story like an open book, instead of being able to hone in on certain portions of it when they presented themselves.

Right then, I was glad that we’d never made any attempt to forge a contract with *him*. My skin crawled just thinking about how much ammunition he would have over me if he had seen some of the worse parts of my life through the dream cycle. Even the vague generalities he was speaking in now were hitting closer to home than I would have liked.

If he’d actually said Aster’s name, I wasn’t even sure how I would have reacted to it.

“Hold on,” said Tohsaka, “just what are you trying to say here? That the only reason she made a contract with that thing is because there was a time when she made the opposite choice?”

I kept my face impassive, even as the bugs in the attic began savaging each other. “No. What happened in my past has no bearing on my decision to bring Jackie into the fold. You’re reaching, Andersen.”

*So drop it.*

But he didn’t, of course, and even if he could have heard my thoughts, he probably wouldn’t have. His eyes narrowed on me.

“You’re good at hiding your tells,” he said. “Most of the time, at least. Presenting that impassive wall makes you feel in control of the situation, of *yourself*, doesn’t it? But however you manage that air of calm, it’s not perfect, not all the time. You were fully prepared to kill Jack the Ripper, even in the form of a child — and yet, when the time came to actually do it, your hand shook and you faltered.”

Jackie stiffened and looked up at me. “Mommy?”

“You’re not being fair,” Arash came to my defense. “Are you trying to say it would have been better to kill Jackie? Listen to yourself.”

“She’s a Servant,” Andersen said bluntly. “Equating eliminating a Servant with the act of killing a living person is foolhardy. A Heroic Spirit — even one as twisted and evil as Jack the Ripper — has already had their life set in stone. Changing any of it isn’t possible.”

Later, I remembered that he wasn’t actually completely right. The fact that one of Aífe’s previous summonings had left so indelible a mark that her Master had appeared in her dreams proved that particularly strong impressions and powerful memories *could* carry over and influence the Heroic Spirit on the Throne.

Right then, however, Aífe was so far from my mind that I didn’t even think of it.

“And yet, she’s perfectly willing to be an ally,” I said coolly. “You seem to think you know so much about me, Andersen, so if you know as much as you think you do, then you should know that I was given a second chance myself. Are you telling me I shouldn’t pay it forward? That I should pass up on someone just because they’re not neat and tidy and perfectly good, as though any hero ever was?”

“As though you can trust her?” said Andersen. “Will you still think she’s worth trying to save when you wake up with her knife in your gut?”

“That won’t happen,” said Arash.

“Frankly, I’m surprised you care so much, Andersen,” I said. “I thought you *liked* stories that had sad, tragic endings. Stories where the main character died or some other terrible fate befell them. They were more real to your own life experiences, weren’t they?”

His cheek twitched. I pounced on it. “Did you think I’d never read *The Little Match Girl*? Or that I didn’t know anything about your history? My mother was a literature professor. I’ve known about you since I was six. For how keen your eyes are, you’re not somehow immune to being blinded by your own past. The fact you couldn’t hack it as an actor doesn’t mean everyone else has to fail, too.”

“And the fact you killed one innocent child does not make every other that finds itself on the other end of your blade innocent, too,” he snapped back at me.

A heavy silence fell upon the room like a blanket, smothering everyone and choking the conversation to a halt. Jackie was uncertain, looking between me and Andersen, but Nursery Rhyme watched with morbid curiosity and Tohsaka was appalled. Caster, at least, for whatever it was worth, didn’t immediately jump to judging me, but Arash didn’t seem at all surprised.

I guess he’d seen as much through the dream cycle. The fact that he hadn’t ever started to treat me any differently was...something of a relief.

“Like I said,” I spoke into the silence, “for how insightful you are, you’re surprisingly blind. I’m not going to pretend that what I’ve done doesn’t impact my decisions. I’m not even going to deny that I’ve done things I regret or things that I don’t wish I could have changed. If you’re trying to tell me that my decision to make a contract with Jackie instead of killing her was made because of one of those things, then you’re not telling me anything I don’t already know. So what?”

Tohsaka blanched, flinching away. “You’re telling me you actually —”



I pinned him with a stare, and coldly told him, “Her own mother thought a quick death was kinder than what would have happened to her otherwise. I made the only decision that made sense with the information I had at the time. That doesn’t mean I didn’t hate every second of it.”

“Uhn...” Fran murmured, eyes hidden behind her bangs.

I turned back to Andersen. “I’m not stupid. I’m well aware of what Jackie is and how dangerous she is. I know better than to think that she’s some poor, misunderstood little girl that everyone thinks is far worse than she actually is.” I’d tried to kill Bonesaw, after all, and she wasn’t much older at the time than Jackie was now. “But I’m willing to give her a chance anyway, if she’s willing to give it an honest shot.”

I wasn’t sure I could say I owed it to anyone. But if I did, I think I owed it to that girl at the end of the world, the one with her mind slowly falling to pieces, who sat in the dirt, barely able to string a thought together, and regretted some of the things she’d done.

And maybe, on some level, I owed it to Theo, too.

Jackie clung tighter to me. “Mommy is Mommy, as long as she’s Mommy. We don’t care why.”

Paradoxically, Andersen’s face broke out into a grin. “Ah, self-awareness. You’d be surprised how rare a trait that winds up being. Fine.” He turned away, and over his shoulder, tossed, “Go ahead and take your chances with her. As long as you’re willing to take responsibility for whatever happens, then I have no more objections.”

He vanished and went off to do...whatever it was he was going off to do. Frankly, I was just glad he’d left. I’d had enough of having my decisions and my past picked apart for one day.

“So that’s it?” Tohsaka asked. “We’re just going to move on like none of that happened?”

“If you have any concerns about working with us,” I said, “I’m sure the Director would be happy to address them. If you don’t think you can continue working with Jackie and me, then your contract with Chaldea can be renegotiated and annulled, and you can go on your way while we solve this Singularity.”

As Aisha might have said, *suck it up, buttercup*. I didn’t want to lose another Master and Servant, especially not one as versatile and powerful as Nursery Rhyme, but it was more important that we could all work together than just having more firepower, so if we had to cut him loose, then we had to cut him loose.

And I wasn’t feeling particularly charitable just then, which might have had something to do with it.

Tohsaka grimaced, but between his discomfort and the temptation of the money he — or his family, rather — was going to be receiving for helping us, the money won.

“Fine,” he said. “If you want to get yourself killed, then I guess I can’t stop you. If you need me, I’ll be in the study.”

He spun on his heel.

“Papa,” said Nursery Rhyme, “I can stay and play with Jackie, right?”

Tohsaka stopped mid-stride, and for a moment, fought with himself again. Eventually, grudgingly, he said, “If that’s what you want.”

“Yay!” she cheered. “Jackie, we can play!”

Jackie hesitated and looked up at me. “Mommy?”

I tried my best to give her a smile and patted her gently on the head. “The apartments on the floors above us are empty. As long as you two don’t make a mess or hurt yourselves, you can go and play in them.”

Jackie’s face broke out into a smile. It stretched at the scars that marred her cheeks, but made her look more her age. “Yay! Alice, let’s go play!”

She raced towards the stairs, and a giggling Alice followed after her. The clomp of their footsteps was rapid and loud, and I thought, if it was Mom, she probably would have chastised them for running up the stairs.

I didn’t have it in me just then to try.

“I suppose,” Caster began into the silence that they left behind, “I should attempt to persuade you, as Andersen did, but I don’t think I would have any more success than him.” He sighed. “And if I’m entirely honest, for all of Jackie’s history, I’m not certain *I* could kill her in cold blood either.”

I didn’t say anything. I wasn’t sure what I should have said to begin with. Thank him? For not telling me I should kill Jack the Ripper, no matter what form she took?

In the end, I didn’t have any better response. “Thank you.”

Jekyll chose that moment to appear on the threshold. “Is aught the matter? I heard an awful commotion, and then what I believe to be an argument just now. Has everything been resolved?”

“Everything’s fine, Doctor,” said Arash, smoothly taking over so that I could have a moment to center myself. “We contacted the others, too, and they’ll be on their way back soon.”

“I see.” Jekyll glanced over at Tohsaka, but Tohsaka mercifully said nothing and didn’t even notice, he was focused so intently upon Caster’s diorama. “I suppose that makes the information in my possession rather superfluous, seeing as you will no doubt already heard it from the source. I confess, I meant to come and investigate the ruckus the very instant it reached my ear, but a mysterious voice told me I should put it from my mind and continue monitoring the situation at Scotland Yard.”

“That was me,” I told him. “I thought it would be safer for you to stay out of the fighting.”

Jekyll frowned and pushed his glasses back up his nose with the fingers of one hand. “Then there *was* a fight which took place?”

I breathed a long breath out through my nostrils and prepared to get into it, but Arash did me the favor of explaining everything again, with an aside here and there from Caster for context, and I wound up having to do nothing except find a seat on the couch and sag into it. During the course of the explanation, Jekyll eventually found the chair closest to the study, and Caster wound up sitting in the one on the opposite side. Arash stood behind me, hands resting gently on the back of the sofa, and Fran joined me.

“A perilous situation, indeed,” said Jekyll when it was all done. “At least it can be said that all concerned parties emerged healthy and intact, although...”

I really didn't want to have to rehash that argument again. Andersen had dug into some old wounds, and they were still bleeding enough that I didn't want to let someone else even come close to them right now.

I was already dreading the conversation I was going to have to have with Marie.

“If you want to explain to Jackie why she has to die,” I told him bluntly, “then she's upstairs. You can do the deed, if you think it's necessary.”

“Uhn,” Fran added doubtfully. “Uh-uhn.”

“Ah, perhaps not,” Jekyll said immediately, surrendering. Whether he didn't think he had the stomach to do it himself or if he just didn't think he would be physically capable of it, I didn't really care at that moment. “I shall simply have to trust that your judgment is sound and your decision to spare her correct. Regardless of her...questionable nature, there is no doubt that she will make for a formidable ally in the current circumstances.”

I didn't let myself sigh, but I *did* let myself finally relax a little. I was going to need it for the inevitable blowup that was going to happen when everyone else got back and we had to explain it all again.

Strangely enough, though, I thought the twins and Mash would probably side with me. They might not have shied away from doing what they had to since Septem, but none of them was ever eager to kill, even against Servants.

Although I worried they might make an exception in Jackie's case.

“We've picked up plenty of strange and unusual allies the last few Singularities,” Arash said. He ticked them off on his fingers. “Emperor Nero, Asterios the Minotaur, Queen Boudica of the Iceni, Captain Morgan, Francis Drake —” He switched hands. “— Medea of Colchis, Hector of Troy, Jeanne d'Arc, Stheno, Sir Lancelot...”

“Uhn...?” Fran asked.

“Nowhere near it,” I told her.

I think Spartacus was going to top my list for our strangest allies for a long while.

“I believe I understand your point,” Caster said. He sighed and sagged into his chair. “Compared to some of the deeds of those men and women, a few murders on the streets of London isn’t all that grand an evil, even if it is...*distasteful*.”

“Jackie might be able to help us navigate the city better, too,” Arash pointed out. “She might even know a few places where Paracelsus and the others hid a few things, even if she didn’t realize it at the time.”

Caster nodded. “Such as the location of their Angrboða, whatever it is. Not the jötunn from Norse mythology, surely, although what sort of device would warrant such an ominous name, I’m afraid I can only speculate, and poorly, at that.”

“Angrboða?” asked Jekyll.

“What Jackie referred to as Angry Body,” answered Caster. “She knew precious little more than that, however, and so we do as well. I considered that it may be the name of their device that is producing this fog, but...frankly, a name like that is too much for something as simple as a fog generator, even one as poisonous and insidious as this one.”

“Maybe we’ll find something at the Association when we investigate that,” Arash suggested.

Caster nodded. “Perhaps. Until we know more, however, all we have is a name, and that isn’t much to go on at all.”

No, it really wasn’t.

I chanced a look at the clock sitting on the mantle above the fireplace, just as perfectly restored as everything else in the parlor had been. It would take the twins and Mash about an hour to get back from Scotland Yard, and it would be another hour or so until lunchtime. Hopefully, by then, my appetite would be back and I wouldn’t have to shovel mouthfuls of ash into my stomach.

“Doctor Jekyll,” I began, “was there anything else from any of your other collaborators? Any...news about something happening or a report of a sighting of some mysterious figure or something?”

Jekyll’s lips pursed. “I fear not, Miss Taylor. I have heard little and nothing from the rest of my network, only the relevant information regarding the incident at Scotland Yard. If aught else has occurred in the interim, I have not yet been informed.”

I nodded and levered myself out of my seat on the sofa. “Then I’m going to go take care of something while we have a minute to spare.”

Arash raised a hand. “I’ll hold down the fort while you’re gone.”

I turned towards the study and made to leave. Fran halfway stood up from her seat, questioning me with, “Uh-uhn uh-uh-uhn?”

Arash reached over to gently place a hand on her shoulder. “I think this is something she can handle on her own, Fran. She’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Or so I hoped.

Tohsaka glanced up at me as I passed through the study, his lips thinning, but he turned away without a word and I made it to the stairs unmolested. With Jackie and Nursery Rhyme playing on the third floor, it left the second mercifully free and as private as it was going to get, so I picked my way across the scattered bedding we'd been using during our stay and found the most remote corner I could, a dusty room on the opposite side above where the dining room was on the floor below.

Marie answered immediately, and without preamble, gave me a simple, one-word order: "Explain."

I couldn't stop myself from grimacing. "You already heard the argument I had with Andersen, didn't you?"

"Andersen isn't your Director," Marie replied. "He doesn't have to write up in reports that his ace Master made a contract with *Jack the Ripper*."

I had the urge to look away from her gaze, like a child being scolded. I suppressed it, channeled it into the bugs in the walls as they all engaged in a massive fight, ripping into one another and tearing off limbs and antennae.

"It wasn't how I planned on things going," I admitted — only to Marie, only ever to Marie. "I was ready and prepared to kill her once she told us everything we asked her for, but..."

But I couldn't bring myself to do it again. No matter how bloodstained Jackie's hands were, at that moment, she hadn't been anything more than a vulnerable child within arm's reach.

"So Andersen was right," Marie concluded.

More than he had any right to be. "Yes."

Marie's lips drew tight and her brow knitted together. She looked as though she'd taken a bite of something particularly sour.

"Romani would say you've been emotionally compromised," she said. "So would Da Vinci."

"I know."

"If we still had a full team, this would be grounds to have you recalled," she went on. "Placed on leave, pending a psychiatric evaluation."

"I know."

The last thing Chaldea needed was an emotionally unstable Master. It wouldn't have been enough to get me thrown off the team, but it would have people looking closer into things that neither of us wanted them looking into. There was only so far Marie's authority as a Director extended with the UN and the Association.

Quieter, Marie said, "No one else knows about...*her*. About what happened. I can...bury this until the London Singularity is resolved, but Da Vinci will almost certainly go through the records when

they're filed. I can't stop her without making her more suspicious. I can't delete anything without leaving an obvious hole."

"I know."

And inevitably, Da Vinci would confront me about it. She wouldn't be satisfied with my silence or Marie's order to drop it. Some part of my past was going to come out.

I suppose it was only a matter of time. That I'd managed to dodge it for over two years was already itself a miracle.

At length, Marie asked, "Do you regret it?"

I didn't even need to think about it.

"No."