

## Chapter CXXXI: The Modern Prometheus

I'd been expecting... Well. Something straight out of the novel. A patchwork man, inhumanly tall and gangly, with mismatched limbs and surgical scars all over his body. Not quite the lumbering, green-skinned, square-headed figure from the older movies and pop culture derivatives, complete with bolts jutting out of his neck and a forehead you could run advertisements on, but something anyone could see and recognize as Frankenstein's monster. Unmistakable.

What arrived in tow with the twins and Mash...

"Remarkable. She's simply remarkable," Jekyll muttered as he circled her. "To think, a creation such as this was possible! To imagine that Victor's grandfather accomplished such a feat itself beggars belief, but that she might be so well preserved that she retains her youth decades later..."

...looked nothing like that. In fact, she was so far in the opposite direction that I really shouldn't have been surprised, because this sort of thing had been happening so frequently that it probably would have been more surprising if she *did* match the mental image I'd had. If it weren't for the metal horn jutting out of her forehead and the...I think those were electrical transformers protruding from behind her ears, then she would look like an ordinary teenage girl.

The superhuman strength, at least, I could confirm, because those transformers had to be heavy. Not impossibly heavy, but a normal person would eventually have wound up slouching from the strain of holding them up.

"Moreover, she's perfectly proportioned," said Jekyll. "No sign of malformations or incongruity. Indeed, she seems to be a single cohesive unit — with the unaided eye, why, I can't discern so much as a single blemish..."

He reached out, hand moving towards —

My arm shot out before I could think anything of it, like a reflex, and I took a firm hold of his wrist. He blinked and turned his head towards me.

"Doctor," I said with affected calm, "maybe you'd like to take a moment and think about what exactly you were about to touch."

His brow furrowed, and then he looked first to his hand and his outstretched fingers, and then to the embarrassed and uncomfortable young woman whose chest he'd been about to grope. By the chagrin on his face as he pulled his hand back — and I let it go — he realized the mistake he'd been in the middle of making.

"Ah," he said. "Yes. How...uncouth of me. Forgive me, madam, I meant no offense."

She made a grunting sound, something completely without words or syllables.

"She said it's fine," said Mordred. "As long as you understand and don't try again. That's what I got out of that, at least."

“He tries that on me, and I’m flash-frying him,” Jeanne Alter promised.

“I think Doctor Jekyll has learned his lesson,” said Ritsuka.

Jekyll nodded. “Most certainly!”

“You can understand her?” I asked Mordred.

Mordred made a face. “Kinda. ‘S hard to explain. More like I understand her meaning than the actual words, ya know?”

“You can’t understand her either, Senpai?” asked Ritsuka.

Was I supposed to?

“It seems the one thing the good Doctor Frankenstein neglected to install when he reconstructed her was a functional voice box,” Emiya said. “She can vocalize, but syllables and sentences don’t seem like something she can quite manage.”

“Uhn,” the girl grunted, but nothing more articulate than that.

“Quite the oversight,” said Jekyll. “Perhaps the good doctor...was not so fond of the idea of his creation talking back.”

Her head dropped, and her bangs flopped down over her eyes as her lips drew into a tight line. Not a happy memory, then. Not one she liked thinking of.

I never would have thought I’d be saying this about Frankenstein’s monster, but...I could relate.

“Does our new friend here have a name?” Arash asked, not unkindly.

She looked up at me, met my eyes with something pitiable and fragile on her face, something I couldn’t quite describe with words. What passed between us might be called understanding, but I wasn’t sure I could rightly go that far. I felt almost like...like I was looking at a reflection, two years out of date, and yet, she didn’t look anything like that at all.

She was trapped in her own head. Unable to properly communicate, but able to grasp at least most of what we were saying. She didn’t have words, she couldn’t sign properly, let alone in ASL, and I doubted she could write even her own name. She was, for all intents and purposes, mute and illiterate.

But something of her meaning was still conveyed. The longing, the attachment, the bitterness, and yet the desire for affection. Yeah. The monster in the novel had never chosen a name for himself, but if he had, if he had never completely shed his yearning for his creator’s affection...

“Fran,” I said confidently, “right?”

Surprise stretched across her face, followed shortly and swiftly by delight and something akin to happiness. She nodded firmly and eagerly. “Uhn!”

Ritsuka blinked. “Whoa.”

“Holy shit, how did you do that?” Rika exclaimed.

“That’s...the name she chose when we found her,” Mash said with numb disbelief. “Miss Taylor, how did you know?”

How, indeed.

“I think I understand what you meant, Sir Mordred,” I said. I dodged the question, because I wasn’t sure I had a good answer myself. “She can’t talk, but that doesn’t mean she can’t express herself in other ways.”

Mordred nodded. “Yeah.”

It would make communicating with her a little more difficult, though. Most people didn’t truly understand what it was like to be unable to use words like that, to be completely incapable of talking in any real sense, but I could remember all too vividly the isolation of it, the people talking about you and around you but rarely ever *to* you and almost never *with* you.

Very few people really understood what it meant to be alone in a crowded room.

“An interesting specimen, nonetheless,” said Caster, stroking his beard. “Not a homunculus, by her coloration and general demeanor, and yet not a Heroic Spirit either. Doctor Jekyll was quite correct to be so astounded — Doctor Frankenstein must have been quite the genius to achieve something so remarkable.”

“No, seriously!” Rika insisted. “How? First Cinnabon, then Onii-chan, and now Senpai, too!”

I turned to Ritsuka. “The Director said you found her in a room off of the library, hidden away in a coffin?”

Ritsuka nodded. “Yeah. After we took care of the Caster who killed Doctor Frankenstein, we found her while we were looking through the rest of the mansion. The only other important thing we could find was the note he left behind. Everything else was just...”

He shrugged. Like he didn’t quite know how to describe it.

“Various forms of magecraft paraphernalia, Miss Taylor,” Mash supplied. “Sir Mordred investigated his workshop, since her Magic Resistance is so high, but —”

“Didn’t find shit,” Mordred said bluntly.

Mash sighed. “Yes. That.”

I suppose it would have been too easy for us to find the answers to every single one of our mysteries less than twenty-four hours after we arrived here. I wasn’t sure I would have trusted it if they *did* find something in his workshop that listed out all of the perpetrators and every single one of their plans. It was more likely it would have been a plant than the genuine solution.

“The note?”

Ritsuka reached into his pocket, rummaged about a bit, and then produced a folded up scrap of paper. When he handed it over to me, I unfolded it and read through the short, hastily scrawled message on it:

*I've learned of a certain plot. Its name is 'Project Demonic Fog.' Though its present state is still unknown, the three leaders of the project are 'P', 'B,' and 'M', can cast spells beyond human wisdom. Probably Heroic Spirits.*

Out of some vain hope that there would be more, I checked the other side, but I'd already known that it was going to be blank, so I tried not to be too disappointed.

I passed the scrap off to Caster, who read it himself and eventually passed it over to Jekyll. He scanned it quickly, then sighed.

“So Victor truly has been killed, has he?” he asked, crestfallen. “There was no mistake?”

“I'm sorry,” Ritsuka answered solemnly. I couldn't help wondering just how personal their confirmation of his death had been.

Jekyll shook his head and handed the piece of paper back to Ritsuka. “I had best inform the rest of the network,” he said ruefully. “I'm certain they will all want to hear of this development, though I can't say that we'll be able to find a replacement at all, let alone with speed. Please excuse me.”

He left the parlor and disappeared further into the apartment. I kept track of him as he went, until he eventually wound up in a small study with an antique radio, although for this era, it was probably state of the art. It was situated atop a desk, and he sat down in a chair in front of it to start the task of contacting the other agents in his network.

Fran made an inquisitive sound in the back of her throat.

“I don't know,” said Mash. “Doctor Jekyll said that they weren't very close, but he does seem pretty sad that Doctor Frankenstein is dead. Maybe he cared more than he was willing to admit.”

“People grieve in their own ways,” I agreed. A bitter part of me had to acknowledge that sometimes, that included falling apart.

“Come on!” Rika complained. “Are none of you going to answer me? How are you guys *doing* that?”

I didn't say anything, for a lot of different reasons. Not only because I couldn't really explain it myself, but because the one theory I *did* have — that the shared experience of being voiceless made it easier for me to catch nuance the others might not — didn't just touch on things I didn't want to talk about, but also ran headlong into Ritsuka and Mash being able to do it, too, and died an ignoble death.

Ritsuka, with the sort of smugness all big brothers took with their younger siblings, told Rika, “I guess it's just something you either have...or you don't.”

“Senpai!” said Mash, scandalized.

“Hey!” Rika squawked.

And Fran lifted a hand to her mouth to stifle a breathy sound that might have been her version of a giggle. It was overshadowed by Mordred’s loud, boisterous laughter.

“Ha! Good one!”

“Not you, too!” Rika whined. “Stop teaming up on me! I don’t know how to start my own club, or how to play Blackjack, and don’t even get me started on the hookers!”

“W-what?” Mash gasped. “B-blackjack? H-hookers?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” asked Mordred, confused.

Ritsuka sighed. “It’s from a tv show.”

Naturally. At least she was in a good enough mood to make jokes. It meant that whatever she’d seen at Frankenstein’s mansion wasn’t bad enough to be all that traumatizing, and while the twins couldn’t be called innocent by any stretch of the imagination at this point...some part of me wanted them to retain whatever little bit of it they had left.

Unfortunately, we were on the job. This wasn’t the time to relax just yet.

“Let’s talk about P, B, and M,” I said, and the mood instantly sobered again. “The Director said that the Caster you fought introduced himself as Mephistopheles. Did he give you any other clues about what was going on?”

The twins and Mash traded looks, frowning at one another.

“Not really,” said Ritsuka. “Honestly, he was kind of...”

“Screwy,” Rika finished for him. “And not like literally screwy, like he had bolts in his head or something —” Fran’s hand made it halfway up to her head before she froze and let it drop again. “— but screwy like he had a few bolts loose.”

“He had a twisted personality,” Mash said. “At the end, he said something about...how lucky I was, that I had more chances to turn on my Master. And I would never!”

The very idea of it seemed to horrify her.

“Nah, you got him pegged, Shieldy,” said Mordred. Shieldy? What was up with that nickname?

“That guy wasn’t right. He might be the kind of guy to stab his Master in the back, but you ain’t got that sort of thing in you.”

“Man, and I missed it!” Jeanne Alter complained. “Damn, that fucker sounds like a riot!”

“You’re forgetting something,” Emiya interrupted. “He said he was there to recruit Frankenstein, remember? And Frankenstein refused, right up until the very end.”

“And it got him killed,” said Arash.

“So it seems.”

Although it begged the question of how he'd found out as much as he had, and why he hadn't written out the culprits' full names. P, B, and M? If he knew that much, then didn't he know their full names already?

Or maybe he'd been writing the note for himself, with the intent of sharing his findings through the radio later. In that case, I guess it made more sense not to write out the full name if he didn't need it. It was just incredibly inconvenient for us that he hadn't.

“P, B, and M, hm?” Caster said thoughtfully. “I'm afraid that doesn't narrow the field quite as much as we would like.”

Especially, I thought, since *Paracelsus* was standing in the room with us. On the list of famous magi who might qualify for the Caster class, there wasn't exactly a huge list of names under 'P.' B and M weren't exactly all that much better, with the exception of the big names, like Merlin and Morgan le Fey, but neither of those had the prime candidate less than ten feet away from me.

Caster's lips pursed. “Unless we're not assuming that this Mephistopheles character wasn't the 'M' mentioned in the note? I confess, the only major suspect I would have is Morgan le Fey.”

Mordred snorted. “Nah, I already checked. I told you, remember? If that bitch was here, she'd have parked her ass in the palace and stayed there. Didn't see hide nor hair of her when I went to look.”

Emiya huffed out a short chuckle. “No family reunion here, I suppose.”

Mordred grinned a sharp grin. “Thank God for that!”

It made me wonder exactly how far and what sort of relationship Emiya had had with King Arthur. That she'd been his Servant, if I remembered right, was something we'd already gotten confirmed, and that he'd been in love with her, well, his reaction in Septem pointed that way. But had she reciprocated? Had they fallen in bed together? How intense and passionate had their relationship been?

With Mordred right there might not be the best of times to go asking that, though. Even if the myths hadn't been entirely right, and we'd gotten plenty of evidence that not everything lined up over the past several months, there hadn't been any sign that Mordred's part in things was any different than how the legends said it was. Her relationship with King Arthur was, at the very least, complicated.

Caster shrugged and shook his head. “Then, I must admit, I don't have much in the way of other suspects.”

Ritsuka grimaced and shared a look with his sister. “That's about where we are, too,” he said. “We couldn't really think of too many people who could fit those initials.”

It occurred to me, suddenly. “Medea.”

Ritsuka and Rika shared another look.

“Medea of Colchis?” asked Caster, surprised. “I suppose, but... Why on Earth would someone like her be here?”

“You could say the same of Faust’s demon,” I pointed out.

“Touché,” Caster allowed with a slight dip of his head.

“Would we really see her again so soon?” asked Ritsuka. “On the enemy’s side again, too?”

Caster blinked. “You mean to say you’ve faced her before?”

“Yes,” answered Mash. “During the last Singularity, Okeanos...both her younger self and older self were present, although those were extenuating circumstances.”

“You don’t say,” Caster murmured thoughtfully.

It wasn’t necessarily a bad point. If we looked at it in broad strokes, the Singularities we’d solved so far had Servants that largely followed the theme of each Singularity. Aside from Fuyuki, which was a deviation of an actual Grail War, Orléans had Heroic Spirits with either strong ties to France or to dragons, Septem had been sprawling and diverse — much like the Roman Empire had been — with Heroic Spirits connected either to the place they’d been summoned or the Empire itself, and Okeanos had featured both pirates and Heroic Spirits from seafaring legends. Both our side and the enemy’s had tended to follow that pattern.

The trouble was, the mythology of Britain was largely dominated by King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table — as evidenced by the one standing not too far away, leaning on the wall next to fireplace with her arms crossed. If we were willing to go so far as trusting Mordred, then Morgan le Fey wasn’t here, and I couldn’t think of any reason why Merlin himself would be all that interested in coating the whole city in fog.

“We might not even be looking at a magus at all,” said Emiya. “The Caster class isn’t solely a place for them, after all.”

Ah.

“Shakespeare.”

Ritsuka hummed. “So we might be looking for an author or something instead.”

Mordred snorted. “You think some guy with a pen made that fog out there?”

In one, smooth motion, I unsheathed my Last Resort, and everyone jolted in surprise — even more so when I tossed it over to Mordred, who caught it deftly.

“Huh,” she said, examining it and rolling it around in her hand. “The hell is this, exactly?”

“The original knife was made by an inventor I happened to know, back before Chaldea,” I told her, and that was all I was giving her about that part. “After we summoned Shakespeare, I gave it to him

and asked him to use his Enchant skill to make it stronger. What you're holding now is the end result."

She scrutinized the blade with a frown, like she was looking for what made it so special. Unless she decided to turn it on, I didn't think she was going to find it.

"She used it to kill a dragon back in Orléans!" Rika blurted out.

Caster goggled at me openly, and Mordred arched an eyebrow at me. "No shit?"

"It was technically just a wyvern," Mash corrected, "b-but yes. Miss Taylor, u-um, stabbed it through the eye."

"Damn," said Mordred, and she actually sounded impressed. "That's pretty hardcore, not gonna lie. Wouldn't've expected it outta someone as squishy-looking as you."

She tossed my Last Resort back, and using the tiny ant I'd secreted into one of the nanothorn ports, I snatched it out of the air just as deftly and easily as Mordred had, disguised the ant crawling up the knife and into my sleeve with a twirl of the blade to reverse my grip on it, then slid it back into its sheath. I could've just used my phantom limb, but it might have looked less impressive, especially if she could sense it.

"Alright," she went on. "So maybe we're looking for a famous author guy instead. We got any ideas for that, too?"

Ritsuka sighed. "Unfortunately —"

"— not really?" said Rika. "I mean, we're two kids from Tokyo, you know? English literature wasn't the biggest thing we were learning back in high school."

"I know a little bit," Ritsuka amended. "But, um, the classics were never really my favorites, so I can't really say." He gestured over towards me. "Senpai's mother was a literature professor, though, so she might have some idea." He added, "Maybe Mash, too?"

"I'm flattered that you think so, Senpai," said Mash, "but..."

Yeah.

"John Milton," I listed, "the Brontë sisters, Mary Shelley, Lord Byron, Thomas Paine, Edgar Allen Poe, Alexander Pope, J.M. Barrie, Thomas Malory, Herman Melville —"

"Okay!" said Rika. "Okay, we get it! There's a lot of famous authors!"

My mouth twisted into a frown. Strictly speaking, one or two of those had been more philosophers than novelists, but they'd had enough of an impact on Western thought and society that I was willing to include their less fictional writing as being close enough. J.M. Barrie might have been too close to the modern day, though, but I was never entirely certain where exactly the cutoff point was supposed to be.



“A difficult position to be in,” Caster noted. He tossed me another dubious glance, like he wasn’t sure what to make of me anymore. “If we look for magi, we don’t have a large enough list to speak much of, but if we look outside of those scant few famous mages, we suddenly find ourselves with more options than we can feasibly investigate.”

“And it might not even be an English writer,” Arash added. “I’m sure there were several foreign writers who had a lot to say about British colonialism, too, who might have a reason to want to choke London like this.”

“If we broaden things that far, we’ll be talking about half the world,” said Emiya. He sighed and carded a hand through his hair, rubbed at his scalp. “India alone would have us here talking possibilities for days.”

Mahatma Gandhi could have been on that list, too, in fact. He was famous enough, but I wasn’t sure if he was too modern to count.

“There was one other clue,” I reminded them. “‘Can cast spells beyond human wisdom.’ If Doctor Frankenstein was as true and talented a mage as Jekyll is convinced he was, then at the very least, our perpetrators can make it *look* like they’re incredibly talented magi.”

“And that just puts us back at square one,” Ritsuka lamented.

“Yes, it does,” Mash agreed ruefully.

Jeanne Alter sneered. “So that whole spiel just now was a complete waste of time?”

“No,” I said. “It means that if P, B, or M *is* a writer, they probably wrote fantasy. Something that was impressive enough to make Frankenstein think what he did.”

Unfortunately, while that did eliminate people like the Brontë sisters, and Mary Shelley was just unlikely, considering the subject of her work was here in the parlor with us, it didn’t narrow the list down to something as convenient as a single name. Milton, Melville, and Malory were still in the M section, for example, and all three of them would pose a problem if they were involved.

I didn’t really want to have to go toe to toe with Moby Dick. Or...toe to flipper. Whatever.

Admittedly, I was a little relieved that there wasn’t a “T” in the list, because that would have meant Tolkien could be a suspect, and the idea of what the One Ring might do if it was even halfway real was actually kind of frightening. Fortunately, I think we would have seen Sauron’s tower and burning eye first, even through this fog.

“I guess that means it’s still a mystery, for now,” Ritsuka said tiredly. “Until we find out more, we’ll just be going around in circles.”

“Uhn...” Fran murmured lowly, disappointed.

“It won’t be forever,” I assured her. “Eventually, we’ll find whoever is behind all of this and put a stop to them. Doctor Frankenstein won’t have died in vain, and those responsible for his death won’t get away with it.”

This didn't seem to satisfy her, exactly, but the grim line of her mouth said that she was looking forward to it. Whatever her relationship to her creator and his family, it seemed she at least liked them enough to mourn their deaths.

"For now," said Caster, "the hour grows late, and I dare say we shan't be sending out any more expeditions — not when this will be Assassin's most opportune time, where they are most advantaged. We here have already eaten, but I'm sure the rest of you must be famished."

As though to answer him, Mash's stomach growled, and her cheeks bloomed with pink. "S-sorry! It's just, we really haven't eaten since this morning, and while a Demi-Servant like me doesn't need food as much as a normal human, I-I still get hungry."

"Uhn!" Fran grunted, bobbing her head.

"Oh yeah," said Ritsuka. "I guess you probably haven't eaten in a really long time either, have you?"

Fran shook her head.

"Maybe not even ever," I added. Her creator probably hadn't been particularly attentive about that sort of thing, not if he locked her up in a coffin for several decades.

Rika grinned. "Oh, man, have we got a treat for you!" She turned to Emiya. "We need some gourmet food! Stat! Can't you see the poor girl is skin and bones?"

Emiya sighed. "Yes, of course, I'll see to it right away. I suppose I should have known better than to keep you waiting this long as it is. Any requests?"

Rika nodded sagely. "That's a good question!" To Caster, she asked. "Whaddya got to eat 'round these parts?"

And for some reason, she saw fit to put on an exaggerated Texan accent.

"Well..." Caster stroked his beard. "Doctor Jekyll's pantry should be close to fully stocked, although I'm afraid I'm not so familiar with its contents that I could tell you what that means. Various forms of meat and poultry, one would assume, in at least enough supply to last a few days, as well as assorted grains and other such things."

Emiya shook his head. "I'll figure something out as I go. I'm sure he'll have something that I can make, even if it's drowning in salt."

I could feel my blood pressure spike, and I wasn't even going to be eating it. Maybe I should warn Marie and the technicians to watch out for coronary distress and large increases in cholesterol, considering how much lard the English tended to cook with in this era.

He waved a hand and vanished into spirit form, disappearing from the group. We'd all gotten used to it enough that no one batted an eye at his leaving.

"Aren't...you an alchemist?" asked Ritsuka.

“Yes, of course,” said Caster immediately. “But I’m afraid it was my wife who was always more talented in the culinary aspects of domestic life. My meals always tended to be a bit more...basic.”

I paused, listening to the conversation with half an ear as I gathered a larger swarm in Jekyll’s study, because I’d just heard something important.

“Huh,” said Rika. “I thought alchemy began in the kitchen.”

Caster broke out into laughter. “My dear girl, whoever gave you that idea? No, no, alchemy has its origins in the metallurgical practices of the ancient Egyptians, and that study eventually made its way into Europe, where magi married it with the principles of Western magecraft. Strictly speaking, the alchemy of the modern day, at least that which the orthodox magi of the Clock Tower practice, little resembles what it was originally.”

“Fullmetal Alchemist lied to me?” Rika despaired dramatically.

Caster blinked at her, confused. “I...suppose it must have,” he allowed cautiously.

She moaned. “Next you’re going to tell me that homunculi aren’t actually made from the Philos —”

“SHIT!” came Emiya’s voice, followed immediately by the sound of a metal pot clattering to the floor, and the twins and Mash both startled, looking in the direction of the kitchen. Caster’s face pinched into an expression of embarrassed regret.

“Ah,” he said ruefully. “Yes. Perhaps I should have warned her.”

A moment later, Emiya reappeared across the threshold, ducking under a cast iron pan that came dangerously close to hitting Jeanne Alter, who squawked and jumped out of the way.

“What the fuck?”

“Watch where you’re throwing that, you madwoman!” Emiya barked back over his shoulder. “You’re going to hurt someone!”

Renée stalked in him, hefting another large pan that she wielded like a sword. Her expression was just as cold and emotionless as it had been before, but there was an air about her that I would have called furious.

“Master,” she reported flatly, “this thief was attempting to steal food from the pantry.”

Mordred busted out into laughter.

“Hey!” said Rika. “He’s not a thief! He’s a house-husband! He earns his keep!”

“That’s the part of this you’re objecting to?” Emiya demanded incredulously. “She actually hit me with the first one, you know! I can show you the damn bruise!”

“It didn’t actually hurt all that much, did it?” Arash asked, curious.

“It’s the principle of the thing!”

“Forgive me, Renée, I should have told you,” said Caster. “This man is another one of our guests, a Servant in their service, and it seems that he is the designated cook amongst them. He was just going to make a meal for his comrades who haven’t eaten yet, and I’m afraid, in my carelessness, I forgot to tell you. My sincerest apologies, my dear.”

Renée froze, turning from Emiya to regard Caster, and for several long seconds, she just stared. Her expression was too opaque to make out what she must have been thinking. And then, with just the barest hint of confusion, she asked, “I have to let him use the kitchen?”

“For now,” Caster answered, smiling gently. “Perhaps tomorrow, you might cook them all a breakfast that convinces them of your singular talent, but for tonight, well, I wouldn’t want to ask you to make another meal after you spent so much time and effort preparing the last one so recently.”

For several seconds more, Renée was silent again, and I thought I saw a tiny tremble in the fist clutching the pan like it was a weapon. At length, she asked, “Do I have to?”

Caster nodded. “Just for tonight.”

She closed her ruby red eyes for a moment. “Very well,” she said. Stiffly, she relaxed into a less combative posture, clutching the handle of her pan in her hands as she folded them in front of her. “If that’s what you order, Master, then I shall allow him into the kitchen.”

She turned her frigid stare back over to Emiya.

“For tonight.”

Still stiff as a board, she spun on her heel and left the room, and the instant she was out of sight, Emiya heaved a heavy sigh. Mordred, still laughing, doubled over, wheezing and clutching her gut with both arms.

“You could have warned me you had a homunculus hanging around doing the dishes,” Emiya rebuked Caster.

“Yes, I should have,” said Caster. “I suppose I owe my apologies to you, as well. I would, of course, be only too happy to introduce you all now. However...” He sighed. “Dear Renée seems to be in quite the mood, so I’m afraid they’ll have to wait for later.”

“Hold on,” said Rika, “*that* was a homunculus?”

Caster’s brow furrowed. “Yes. I...suppose you’ve never seen one before?”

Rika slumped, grimacing, and wiped both hands down the sides of her face.

“Fullmetal Alchemist lied to me,” she moaned. “Again!”

“Did it?” said Caster, still confused. “I’m sorry, my dear, but I’m afraid who or whatever this Fullmetal Alchemist is must have been quite misleading about the true nature of alchemy.”

In his study, Jekyll stood from his chair, disentangling himself from his radio.

“Don’t mind her,” said Ritsuka. “She’s just suffering the consequences of shaping her understanding of magic from anime and manga.”

“Hey!” Rika said indignantly.

“Don’t worry so much, Master,” Emiya told her reassuringly. “Most first generation magi never get the chance to correct that mistake. You’re doing just fine.”

“That doesn’t make me feel much better,” she groused.

He huffed a low chuckle. “Fine, fine, I know just how to cheer you up.” He cast a glance at Caster. “Provided that woman doesn’t try to throw me out again.”

“I would expect her to watch you closely,” said Caster, “but despite her own feelings on the matter, she’ll listen to me and she won’t bar you access — tonight, at least. Although she might not look it at first glance, she can be...quite territorial.”

Emiya huffed out another laugh. “Somehow, that feels familiar.” He grinned. “Well. It’s not the first time someone has tried to boot me out of the kitchen. I don’t intend to let her succeed.”

“If she tries to throw another pan at you, next time, do us all a favor and block it with that huge head of yours,” Jeanne Alter drawled.

“Next time,” he promised, “I’ll do something even more impressive.”

On that note, he disappeared again, back to the kitchen, presumably. Off to the side, Mordred’s laughter finally died down into weak giggles.

“Oh, man,” she said, still grinning broadly. Tears glittered in the outer corners of her eyes. “That was great. A big, strong Archer class Servant, chased around the house by a little homunculus! Wielding a pan!” She swiped the tears away with her thumbs one at a time. “Damn. I needed that.”

Mash sighed. “At least no one got seriously hurt.”

“Except for his pride,” Ritsuka added dryly.

“Come in, Doctor Jekyll,” I said without looking.

Everyone startled, turning to look at an equally stunned Jekyll, who stood in the threshold with his hand raised to knock and announce his presence. Awkwardly, his arm fell back to his side, but he was too busy blinking at me to notice it at all.

“Doctor Jekyll!” said Mash.

“Never going to get used to that,” Ritsuka murmured.

“Nope,” his sister agreed quietly.

“Ah, yes, I...” Jekyll began uncertainly. “Please...pardon my intrusion.”

He walked into the room haltingly and hesitantly, less sure of himself than he'd been before. My lips thinned. That absolute proprioception was incredibly useful, and throwing people off guard with it could give me the upper hand in negotiations on occasion, but I forgot sometimes how easily it could freak out even my allies.

Arash, as he was wont to do, helped smooth things out. “Everything’s going well with your information network, I assume?”

“Yes, I...” Jekyll cleared his throat. “They were saddened, of course, to hear the news of what happened to poor Victor, but fortunately, the enemy hasn’t yet seen fit to seek any of them out. The circumstances of that may yet change, of course, especially as we attempt to uncover the source of this foul plot, but for now, poor Victor seems to have been the only one to suffer for his part in this investigation.”

“Mephistopheles said he was there to recruit him,” Ritsuka told him.

“Truly?” said Jekyll. “It may be that none of the others will find themselves garnering such attention then, because if any of my collaborators have a single iota the talent for magery Victor possessed, they have not seen fit to inform me. In fact, perhaps that is all for the good. So long as it remains secret — even from me — then the others might yet remain unmolested.”

Mordred scoffed. “Tch. That means it’s gonna be up to us to do the heavy lifting, huh?”

“What?” said Jeanne Alter. “Scared of a little hard work?”

“Ha! Hell no!” said Mordred, grinning again. “In fact, I like it this way better! Less people getting in my way!”

Jeanne Alter sneered. “That’s too bad. I think I’m actually starting to like you.”

“Doctor Jekyll,” I said, interrupting whatever that was before it could take off, “was there something else from your network that we needed to know about?”

Jekyll hesitated again, uncertain. “There...was, in fact. A trifling matter, I would say, only, as we have no other leads as of the current moment, I considered the possibility that it might provide us another avenue of investigation. Even if it bears no fruit at all, we would still be providing aid to the people of the city, helpless as they are against such threats.”

“Aid?” asked Ritsuka.

Jekyll nodded. “There has been...an incident, shall we say,” he said. “Or rather, a series of incidents, all of them noteworthy not for their location or indeed the people affected, but because they seem to share a common cause. A theme, if you will, a rhyme or rhythm, a singular perpetrator utilizing a pattern of behavior.”

“A MO,” I summarized.

Jekyll didn't recognize the term. "MO?"

"Modus operandi," Mash explained dutifully. "It's a term used by some police forces for things like the method and means criminals use to commit crimes."

"Ah — an apt description." Jekyll nodded. "In this case, the modus operandi of our perpetrator is to slip indoors and assault the people inside. For what reason, I could not possibly fathom, but according to the collaborator who brought this to my attention, there have been no major injuries nor any fatalities, and the culprit is said to be a large...book."

My brow furrowed. People were being attacked by a *book*?

"Book?" the twins echoed.

"Uhn?" Fran grunted, sounding just as confused.

"My reaction was much the same, I assure you," said Jekyll. "I received confirmation, however, thrice over, and in no uncertain terms. The one behind these dastardly assaults is a book, described to me as roughly the size of a small child."

Caster stroked his beard thoughtfully, frowning. "Perhaps a grimoire of some kind? I struggle to imagine where it might have come from, however. Unless some poor unfortunate came across it by accident and activated the owner's defensive enchantments."

Unfortunately, I didn't have any better ideas. It wasn't the most out there thing I'd ever dealt with, but on the list of possible familiars a mage might choose, Marie had never put a *book*, of all things.

"Where is this happening?" I asked.

"The only cases yet discovered are in the Soho area," said Jekyll. I glanced over at the clock on the mantle, which read nearly half past nine. Jekyll saw my look and nodded. "Yes, I came to that conclusion as well. To make the journey to Soho, investigate these matters fully, and return to the apartment would be the work of several hours, and it is already quite late enough as it is."

And while it wouldn't be the first time I stayed up late and went out adventuring into the early hours of the morning...I wouldn't be the one going out, since the fog was still a problem. The twins and Mash would be, and even if I was a bit generous and said it only took them four hours to go and take care of this thing, they still wouldn't be back here and getting to sleep until three or four o'clock.

I needed them well-rested so we could go out in the morning while the fog was thin or nonexistent. Nobody would be working at their best after a long day and just a few hours of sleep.

"These cases are not urgent, however," said Jekyll, "so I considered it the wiser course to leave it off until the morrow, after we all have had a chance to rest our eyes."

"I think we can all agree to that," said Ritsuka, looking around at the rest of our group for objections. "Right?"

“Yes,” I answered. “No reason to rush off this late at night if it isn’t life or death.”

“Thank goodness!” Rika cried.

“What?” snapped Mordred. She pushed herself away from the wall. “Screw that! If you lot aren’t going to get off your asses and go, then I’ll just do it by myself!”

She looked ready to storm off and do just that.

“No need for that, Sir Mordred,” Caster chided, and this made her stop long enough for him to continue, “it’s not about willingness to act, it’s about the realities of the situation. Our Assassin is still out there, remember, and the dark of night is the most advantageous time to strike.”

“So?” Mordred blustered. “I’ll just kill ‘em myself, next time they show up!”

“But it has been a long day,” Caster said reasonably. “Why, only a few short hours ago, weren’t they rushing here to see their dying friend healed? Much has happened for them in so little a time, and to push them out the door again on another quest would be to invite Assassin to take advantage, wouldn’t it?”

“Tch.”

Mordred swung back the other way like a pendulum. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“And you are not an endless font of energy yourself,” said Caster, peering at her knowingly. “Without a proper Master, you, too, must spend time to rest and restore your energy, so that you are ready when the time comes to confront the enemy. Your eagerness does you credit, but tearing off after every lead the instant it presents itself can cause problems of its own.”

“Alright,” said Mordred, annoyed, “alright, already! I get it! Geez! We can go out tomorrow! You happy now?”

Caster smiled. “Yes, in fact.”

“Then it’s settled,” I said. I turned to Jekyll. “We’ll start looking into this mysterious book of yours tomorrow morning. For now —”

Emiya’s voice echoed from the dining room.

“Dinner!”