

Chapter CXXXIX: Paracelsus

There was no debating and no protesting. The twins didn't waste any time gathering up everything they needed, slipping their shoes on, and rushing out the front door. They didn't even allow themselves to take things at a slower pace, because the instant they were clear and out into the streets, Emiya and Mash picked the twins up and leapt off at full speed so that they could make the best time possible, Mordred out front leading the way and Jeanne Alter pulling up the rear.

As expected, the instant they were outside and stepped into the fog, communications with them dropped to nothing. There was no way for us to get into contact with them now, not even if we had to. We were completely cut off from each other.

It was an incredible gamble. I wasn't sure if any of them had picked up on it and realized my intent, or if the rush had driven any such thoughts straight out of their heads before they could even form, but either way, there was no mention made of the danger I'd put myself in and no attempts to talk me out of it.

All for the better. The fact that no one else had said anything meant that Caster would be none the wiser, too. If he thought me completely unprotected, if he believed that I didn't suspect him of an ambush or a sneak attack, then he wouldn't have any reason to pass up this chance and he would be all the more surprised when I flipped it back on him.

That was why it was essential that we had never used the Shadow Servant function in front of him and never mentioned it in his presence. A play this risky could never have worked without at least one trump card held in reserve to pull on him if he tried anything.

But that was also why I took as many other precautions as I could, under the circumstances. I kept my bond with Arash under the tightest of grips, ready to call on him in an instant, ready to use a Command Spell, too, if it absolutely came down to it. I kept several bugs on several key points of Caster's body, looking out for suspicious or violent movements — if he so much as twitched in the wrong direction, I was ready to react.

More importantly, I made sure to keep Tohsaka and Nursery Rhyme between us at all times. If things devolved quickly enough, I wasn't sure how much help that would wind up being, but of the two of them, I could at least trust the Servant to react faster than either Tohsaka or I could. It wasn't the best buffer and it wasn't the most reliable one either, but it was still a roadblock between me and Caster. As long as it slowed him down at all, the extra second or two it would give me was more than enough to work with.

An extra second or two could be the difference between life and death, after all, and I knew that better than I think anyone else in our group did. It was a lesson I wasn't sure the twins had fully learned yet, but I was sure, by the end of all of this, they would.

At least immediately, however, nothing happened. Jekyll and Andersen stayed with the rest of us as we meandered into the study and the map located within it, but Renée went back to whatever duties she had outside of cooking as though nothing was wrong. Cleaning the house, probably, all things considered. Outside of her stoic affect, she certainly acted a lot like a maid.

For all of the rest of us, however, there wasn't much else we could do except gather around Caster's map and watch the others' progress. With Arash informed about the situation — concerned as he naturally was to watch the twins rush out of here with most of our team — all I could do was wait. Wait for them to make contact and fight Jack the Ripper, wait for Caster to spring whatever trap he was planning to spring. As I had seemed to be doing a lot of lately, wait.

I didn't even dare to take the risk of looking through Jeanne Alter's eyes to keep track of what the others were doing. Anything at all that might have even the slightest chance of delaying my reaction when the trap was sprung was too dangerous to risk, so I had to stay confined to my own head, or as much as I ever was with my swarm, at any rate.

At least it wasn't a completely helpless and useless wait, like things had been during the Château d'If fiasco. It was nearly as nerve-wracking, but it was a familiar kind of nerve-wracking, the kind that felt like an old friend that I hadn't seen in a while.

I knew that didn't say the most flattering of things about me or the life I'd lived, and it said even worse things about Brockton Bay and Earth Bet, but one way or another, I found a kind of comfort in it. A strange comfort, but a comfort of a kind nonetheless.

It looked like I hadn't quite managed to shake those old thought patterns from a past life.

"Of course, everyone else finds this as suspicious as I do, right?" Tohsaka asked. "That this fog just so happens to coincide with Jack the Ripper's attack on Scotland Yard?"

"Uhn?" Fran asked.

"Yes," said Caster plainly. "This whole scenario has likely been imagined as some sort of plot — perhaps not by Jack himself, but by the nefarious masterminds behind the whole of this situation. What it is they intend to accomplish with this, well, I'm afraid I couldn't say, but whatever their goal, it is safe to assume that the current circumstances are in service of it."

I wondered if that was his attempt at throwing off suspicion, making himself seem uninvolved, or if he really meant it and I was still just being paranoid. I wasn't quite sure what I was going to do if this whole thing blew over without him making a single attempt at doing anything to any of us.

"It must be as you say, Abraham," Jekyll agreed. "That this is intended to lure our compatriots out is clear, but for what purpose, it is indeed difficult to extrapolate upon. It may simply be that this is a means of distracting us all from their true purpose as they destroy or abscond with whatever it is they sought in the bowels of the British Museum, or perhaps they are intent upon furthering their nefarious schemes while Jack the Ripper holds our attention as far away from them as possible. Knowing so little of their personalities or purposes here makes it impossible to say with any certitude the ultimate purpose behind this attack."

Tohsaka's eyes narrowed on the map. "Do you think they meant to get us, too?" he asked me.

"Maybe," I said simply.

And maybe they had. How much did they really know about us and what we were doing here or who among us was unable to brave the fog for fear of drowning in their own blood? If Caster really was one of them, the mysterious "P" in the elusive P, B, and M, then the answer should have been "more than enough."

But even if I suspected, it still wasn't something *I* knew for sure. And if he wasn't? Then it was not only possible, it was probable that they had no idea of our exact numbers or that only some of us were completely unaffected by the fog that choked the city every afternoon and night.

It was like we'd been discussing the day before. We didn't know what they did or didn't know, so any combination at all was entirely possible.

"I can't say I like the idea of sitting around here waiting for something to happen," said Tohsaka, "but I guess drowning on dry land isn't a particularly elegant way of dying."

"I'm sure...*Alice* is grateful for your discretion," Caster said politely.

"As long as Papa is okay, that's all that matters," Nursery Rhyme confirmed.

Tohsaka grimaced, and more to himself than anyone else, it seemed, muttered, "I just don't like feeling like an invalid either."

Something the two of us could actually agree on.

"Uhn," Fran agreed with a sullen nod.

I cast a glance at Jekyll. There was no way of knowing if he had been subverted, provided Caster was who I thought he was, but there was no sense in endangering his life if and when things kicked off if he just happened to be in the metaphorical wrong place at the wrong time. It was better to make sure he was safe and out of the way, and I could keep track of him through my swarm so that if he *was* a sleeper agent, I could see him coming before he came after us.

"Doctor Jekyll," I began, "since we can't keep in contact with the others on our own, maybe you should get back on the radio with your collaborators and keep tabs on things that way."

Jekyll blinked at me, and then adjusted his glasses. "An excellent suggestion, Miss Taylor. While all of you remain here to watch their progress through the city via this map, I shall endeavor to likewise apprise myself of their conditions throughout their encounter with the dastardly Jack the Ripper via my contact in the area. Although the fog may prove a frustrating impediment, any information that might be gleaned would be of use, and so I shall impose upon my network once more to monitor the situation as it unfolds."

And if I was wrong, then he and his collaborators would at least give us a better view of what was happening than the impersonal little dots on the map could.

With a polite, "please excuse me," Jekyll left the room and went to the little office where his radio was set up, then sat back down in the chair and slipped those old headphones back onto his ears.

I made sure to tag Renée better, too, now that Jekyll was out of the way. There was no way of knowing exactly how she had been tuned when Caster made her — I'd heard tales around Chaldea of homunculi maids with superhuman strength, meant to act as both tutor and bodyguard to a family's heir — but I had few doubts that she would side with him in everything.

The only one that left was Fran, and I couldn't find a good reason to convince her to leave the room that wouldn't immediately raise Caster's suspicions, so the only thing I could do was make sure the group was arranged so that I was between her and Caster. I tagged her the same way I did Jekyll and

Renée, and surreptitiously started attaching gossamer lines of thin, nearly invisible silk to her limbs so that I had points of leverage if I needed to pull her out of the way.

How attached I'd grown in so little time. Alec would have been laughing his ass off about how sentimental I'd gotten over something that didn't really mean anything at the end of the day.

And with my web laid out, like a spider, I sat back and waited for my prey to get caught, to snag himself in the threads I'd woven in his path. Patiently, giving nothing away, I watched the twins and their group make their way towards Scotland Yard with my own eyes and watched Caster and the others in our group with every other sense I had.

Caster didn't fall for my bait. Even as the twins reached their goal and the motion of the dots on the map showed the fight that broke out almost immediately once they got there, he didn't suddenly leap into action. The only reaction he had to any of it was for his brow to furrow.

"That's it, then," he murmured. "They'll have encountered Jack the Ripper now — look, you can see how they're fighting."

"Or the general gist of it, at least," Tohsaka muttered softly.

Nursery Rhyme sighed. "I really wanted to play with Jackie again."

"I'm sure we'll find more friends for you to play with later," Tohsaka told her.

"I know," she said simply. "But it won't be the same as playing with Jackie. Jackie is —"

Master! Arash shouted across our bond. I didn't even have time to respond to him and ask what was happening before he shimmered into existence above us and landed, almost catlike, on the floor nearby. Tohsaka startled.

"What the —"

Caster shifted as something thunked into the roof above us, coming from what must have been Arash's perch up there. I realized what must have happened then — he'd dodged the attack by going into spirit form and dropping through the building.

"Trouble," Caster said sharply, eyes wide, brow furrowed, and mouth drawn into a thin line. He was looking in the direction of the wall, as though he could see through it and out into the fog at whatever was out there.

"Enemy Servant," Arash rushed to clarify. "A new one, Archer class, uses a crossbow —"

In the parlor, a window shattered thunderously, shards of glass tinkling as they bounced across the hard wood of the floors, and the flutter of cloth was nearly lost in the thump of someone landing on nimbly in the middle of the room. I whirled about to face the intruder, vaguely aware of Arash spinning about to face the same way and drawing an arrow like it was a dagger.

"Hello, again." A mop of gray hair lifted to reveal piercing green eyes set in a face marred by several scars. From beneath the tattered hem of a worn and ragged black cloak, the tip of a wickedly curved knife glinted. "Will you be our mommy, this time?"

Nursery Rhyme gasped. "Jackie!"

“Jackie?” Tohsaka parroted, echoing my own thoughts. “W-wait, then that means...!”

The dots connected. A to B to C, all in a neat row, and an uncomfortable realization bloomed in my stomach like a poisonous flower. This must have been the same Servant that tried to kill me at Nursery Rhyme’s little tea party yesterday, the one who had hit Fou with a Noble Phantasm and come alarmingly close to actually killing me. As ridiculous as she looked and as little sense as it made for a notorious serial killer to take the appearance of a prepubescent girl, a quick glance with my Master’s Clairvoyance confirmed it — and even that would probably get erased if she escaped us again.

But if Jack the Ripper was here at the apartment, just who was it that the twins and the others were fighting right now?

Jackie tilted her head to the side. “Alice is here, too.” She smiled, cherubic, innocent, like she was just another girl meeting up with a friend. “Sorry, Alice, but we can’t play right now. We’ll come by and play later, okay?”

“I’m afraid that won’t be an option,” Caster said, voice frigid. His face could have been carved from stone. “You escaped me once before some days ago, but you’ll find that you won’t be quite so lucky today.”

“Sorry, Mister Caster,” Jackie said. “We’re not here for you either.”

Her eyes flickered back in my direction, and that was all the warning I had before Arash scooped me up into his arms and leapt into the air in that tiny little apartment. I couldn’t do anything else, so I tucked my arms and legs in as tightly as I could to avoid hitting them on anything as Arash somersaulted, pushed gently off of the ceiling, and landed on the opposite side of the parlor, right on the threshold to the tea room.

Jackie wasn’t fooled. She aborted her initial charge towards me, towards where I’d just been standing, spinning on the balls of her feet and turning on a dime with an agility that I’d come to expect out of someone like Aife, and she came back the other way, cloak flapping behind her. That Arash managed to spin around himself, dropping me back to my feet so abruptly that I stumbled trying to stay standing, and still managed to be quick enough to meet Jackie’s knife with one of his arrows spoke of how fast *he* was, too.

In a burst of motion, they separated, and Jackie’s feet barely landed back on the wooden floor before she was moving again, a flurry of action and violence. She was too fast for my eyes to track her as anything more than a vague blur of black cloth, but I could see her aftermath, the dents and cracks she left on the walls and ceiling as she bounced off of them and the furniture that splintered from the sheer force of her tiny feet using them as leverage. I didn’t have time to even attempt putting up threads of silk to try and slow her down.

Invariably, she came towards me, again and again and again, like every failed attempt was just reason to try harder, but unlike the park, where there was so much free space for her to use to juke off to the side and feint, here, in the apartment, everything was too small and confined. I didn’t even flinch, because Arash was there to block her every time, and the closest she came to actually touching me was my hair being ruffled by Arash’s swings.

On the other side of the parlor, watching from the threshold to the study, Tohsaka took a step back. This was probably the first time he'd gotten a really good look at exactly how fast and impressive Servants were, and I had a tiny thread of sympathy for how out of his depth he must have been feeling.

It was Jekyll, however, that I paid a bit more attention to, because he'd noticed the commotion and was standing up to come and investigate, and the last thing I wanted right then was for him to get caught up in the fighting unnecessarily.

"Stay here," I had a few bugs whisper to him, and he jumped, looking around for who could have spoken. "Let us handle this. Focus on the other fight."

Jekyll looked spooked, but sat back down. "If...you're certain..."

"I am."

Hesitantly, he picked up his headphones and slipped them back over his ears. It was as much as I could ask for. How well he managed to keep his attention where I needed it to be, I couldn't be sure, and I didn't have the space to worry about it.

Jackie broke off from Arash, landing in a crouch on the remains of what had once been the couch I'd woken up on, and she stared him down with unblinking green eyes. Arash held position in front of me, although the arrow he'd been using as a dagger had very clearly seen better days. There were enough cuts carved into the shaft that it was a miracle it hadn't been chopped into a dozen pieces.

"You're getting in our way," Jackie said eerily. She tilted her head to the side, not unlike a praying mantis. "That's okay. We brought a friend along, too."

Arash jolted like he'd been stabbed.

"Shit!" he cursed.

More glass shattered, and Arash dove to the side — not to *avoid* the bolts that whistled through the windows, smashing the glass as they went, but to throw himself into the path of them, arms raised to protect his face and head. They burrowed into his unprotected arms, but the important ones bounced off of his chestplate and clattered to the floor.

Bolts. I recognized them. They were made in an older style, like something out of the earliest days of crossbows, but there were only so many ways to make bolts for a crossbow, and I'd seen my share before both from Shadow Stalker and from Foil.

And they'd been aimed at me. Arash had said there was an Archer out there using a crossbow, hadn't he?

In the space opened up by those bolts, Jackie surged towards me, and I backpedaled, pulling my knife free as I put everything I could — anemic though my swarm was — between us.

But at the last second, the floor of the threshold rose upwards into a thick wall, blocking me off from the parlor completely. Jackie bounced off of it, leaving only a spider-webbing crack behind that crept up across the wood. A moment later, the crack sealed over as though it was never there.

“I suppose I should have expected as much from a simple murderer like you, one who never had cause or opportunity to face a magus before,” Caster said, stepping forward. “I would have at least expected your Masters to explain it to you, however. Did none of them ever tell you not to face a mage in his workshop?”

Jackie didn't reply, just turned around and eyed Caster curiously. As soon as Caster entered the parlor, a wave of bolts flew through the broken windows — where the mist outside was beginning to creep in, I was alarmed to note — but Arash ripped out the ones in his arms and scooped up the ones that had bounced off of his armor and threw them to knock the new ones out of the air. Caster glanced briefly towards their origin, but paid them no more mind than that.

Now there was the question. Was Jackie a sacrificial lamb, meant to throw us off the scent of the real perpetrators, or was this Caster's honest face, staring down his real enemies? As much as my original suspicions felt completely justified, there was a point where I had to admit that the ruse would be too outlandish to be worth doing. When you had an Assassin with as much of an advantage in the current circumstances as Jack the Ripper had, it seemed like a silly decision to make her into a sacrificial pawn to draw suspicion away from yourself.

“On that note,” said Caster, “I have a few *questions* I'd like you to answer in regards to your allies. Specifically, if you would be so kind as to tell me a bit more about what it is they're after.” Another wave of bolts flew towards him, but Arash manifested his bow and shot them all out of the air. Caster grimaced and looked out the window. “And perhaps you could tell your Archer friend outside that it's quite rude to interrupt.”

“You're weird,” Jackie announced bluntly. “Why would we tell you anything?”

She suddenly rushed towards him, lashing out with one of her knives and aiming straight for his heart. Caster didn't even try to dodge, he just grabbed it by the blade and completely ignored the fact that she nearly sliced his fingers off in the process.

“Yes,” he drawled, “I suppose there *is* that consideration, isn't there?”

Arash, I ordered across our bond, take care of the Archer. Caster can take care of himself.

Arash didn't hesitate. *Yes, Master.*

The next wave of bolts, Arash shot out of the air much the same as the last couple, and on top of it, fired off a more deliberate shot at something outside the apartment. Based upon the angle, it was something on the roof of the building across the street from ours.

I sent a probing group out from that very same building, but everything that ventured out into the mist died almost immediately. They gave me only a brief glimpse of a shimmer in the fog, which was essentially useless.

Whoever the other Archer was, Arash seemed to see him just fine, because he leapt out of the broken window and into action, and that was where I lost track of him, because I couldn't send any bugs to follow. He didn't seem to need the help, at least, so I was going to have to leave it in his hands and trust he could handle it on his own.

“Are you well?” a familiar monotone asked from next to me. I paid Renée nothing more than a quick glance to let her know I'd heard her.

“I’m fine,” I told her simply.

Another point in Caster’s favor. If I really hadn’t noticed her coming, she could very well have attempted to ambush me. It wouldn’t have worked, but he didn’t necessarily know that, did he?

In the parlor, Jackie pulled her dagger free, and Caster let her go. Red light poured from his wounds, and when it was gone, so were they, as though his fingers had never even been cut.

Jackie didn’t seem to know what to make of that.

“I see,” said Renée. “If you aren’t wounded, then there’s no need for me to attend to you. Please excuse me.”

As Renée stepped out of the tea room and went back towards the kitchen, Fran stepped slowly out from behind Tohsaka and Nursery Rhyme. Her mouth pulled into a tight line, and sparks of electricity started to build along the transformers sticking out from behind her ears.

“Stay back, if you would, Miss Fran,” said Caster. “There’s no need for you to involve yourself.”

Fran’s lips drew into an even tighter line, but she listened to him and retreated back behind Tohsaka. “Uhn...”

The sparking electricity died away before she could even make any use of it.

“Alice,” Tohsaka murmured, “isn’t there anything you could...?”

“Sorry, Papa,” Nursery Rhyme said apologetically. “Jabberwocky and the Bandersnatch would both make an awful mess in a tiny house like this. They’re too big to play inside.”

How inconvenient. So did that mean she and Tohsaka were going to be mostly useless unless we were fighting outside?

“We seem to be at something of an impasse,” said Caster. “You don’t want to say anything about your allies or your masters, and I... Well, I’ve never had any children I needed to discipline, so I’m afraid I don’t have any experience in it.” He settled a hard look on Jackie. “But if you’re intent on misbehaving, then it seems I don’t have any other choice except to learn.”

Slowly, he lifted his hands up, and then he pressed them together, fingers interlaced, as magical energy swelled within him so strongly that I could feel it even from where I was.

“Do bear with me,” he said. “I’m not quite certain what level of force I should be using, especially against a Servant. I may be a little bit rougher with you than I mean to.”

He said something then — an incantation, it had to be, in a language I didn’t recognize that sounded only vaguely like Latin — and the broken couch Jackie was standing on came alive. The wooden frame grew into arms, then into hands, and they reached for her as though to take hold of her and bind her to their remains. Jackie leapt away, across the room, far enough that the morphing couch couldn’t grab her.

But the instant she landed, the shards of glass from the window she’d originally broken came together and jutted up into needles, piercing through her shoes and feet in a spray of blood. Jackie

let out a startled yelp and ripped herself free of them, leaving more blood behind as she stumbled back towards me until she was pressed up against the wall that had been raised to protect me.

She glanced briefly down at her wounded and bloodied feet, but didn't seem particularly concerned with the damage. For a Servant, I guess it was basically a flesh wound.

"That wasn't nice," she said to Caster.

"I *did* warn you that I haven't any practice with this," Caster replied. His lips drew into a tight line. "And, well, you *are* a murderer. Whether you wear the face of a child or not, those knives of yours have already claimed the lives of several women, just in the last few days, haven't they?"

The thick wall glowed, and I took several steps back as it morphed and twisted just like the couch had, a pair of arms reaching out from the surface to take hold of Jackie. I got a front row seat to the way the wall thinned out — the principal alchemy worked on as a craft. You could change something's composition, its shape, its structure, but you weren't creating material from thin air. You had to take something from one place to put it into another.

Jackie ducked under this set of arms and dodged out of their reach, too, and bounced off of the ceiling, then threw herself at Caster. Caster didn't even bother moving, because he simply didn't have to, not when everything from the furniture to the room itself came alive to aid him. It formed shields to block her strikes, coiled around her limbs like snakes whenever she landed, roiled and raged to upset her footing so that she stumbled.

It wouldn't be right to say he was playing with her, but he was very obviously trying not to kill her outright. Was he giving her an opening to escape by forcing her to retreat when she finally realized she couldn't win, or was he trying to pin her down so that we could get some actual answers out of her about the ones holding her metaphorical leash?

"Stop it!" Jackie finally shouted. She dodged backwards, and when a piece of what had once been the back of a chair tried to snag her leg, she chopped it off with what looked like a large butcher's knife. "Stop getting in our way! We're not here for you, old man! Mister P said our mommy would be here! We just want her!"

What?

"Mister P?" Tohsaka echoed.

"He told you that you would find your mother here? This...Mister P?" asked Caster.

"So just show us where our mommy is and stop bothering us!" said Jackie.

That was confirmation, of a sort, that she *was* working with our apparent masterminds, and on top of it, that one of them had apparently sent her here. *Not* Caster, it looked like, because he wasn't the "P" we were looking for, but someone else who apparently knew Jackie well enough that he knew how to motivate her.

Of course, the question that had to follow was whether "P" had meant to strike at one of us in particular, hence the "mommy" thing, or if this whole thing had just been him manipulating Jackie through her... Could I call it a psychosis? Did it still count when Servants could be so defined by their pasts that they could get stuck in mental ruts whenever they were summoned?

Whatever. Not important. The better question right now was, could *I* manipulate Jackie's...fixation was a good enough word, to get her to hand over more information on the enemy?

Maybe it was a bit of a stretch, but... It worked on Altera, hadn't it? Did I really have all that much to lose by giving it a shot?

"Caster," I called, pitching my voice to carry through the wall that was still in front of me, "let me in."

He hesitated. "Are you sure about this?"

No. But that hadn't ever stopped me before, had it?

"I think Jackie might respond better to a woman's touch," was the answer I gave. If he noticed that I didn't actually answer his question, then he didn't give any indication.

Caster grimaced, but after a moment, he did bring down the wall, and for the first time since the fight began in earnest, I got to see the mess of the room with my own human eyes. The strange shapes jutting out of every wooden surface, the glass needles splattered with blood, the utterly ruined furniture strewn about the whole place.

It was kind of incredible what kind of damage they'd managed to do in only a minute or two.

I could have said it looked like a hurricane had been through the apartment, but that only covered the mess, not the twisted limbs reaching out from the floor and walls and ceiling, midway through the motion of grabbing for someone who wasn't there anymore. Jekyll was probably going to have a fit when he saw it all.

For just a moment, I missed an old friend. I wasn't even sure I had the right to call him that, after...everything.

I took only one step across the threshold and into the chaos, affecting complete nonchalance to all of it, and focused in immediately on Jackie, who was watching the whole thing warily, confused.

Vaguely, I remembered something from my Wards days about approaching children on their level, so I took a careful and cautious knee, making sure to keep my knife out of view. I wasn't stupid. This was a gamble, but I wasn't going to completely disarm myself. That was why I was also keeping a stranglehold on the Shadow Servant function and was completely ready to cast an Emergency Evasion on myself.

"Hello, Jackie," I said to her calmly. "We weren't ever properly introduced, were we? My name is Taylor."

She didn't seem to know what to make of that. "Hi..."

"You said Mister P told you that you would find your mommy here," I began slowly and deliberately. "Do you know what she looks like?"

"No," Jackie answered simply. "That's why we have to find her. The only way for Mommy to be Mommy is if we find her."

"Mister P didn't tell you what she looks like either?"

“No,” said Jackie. “He just told us she might be here.”

So they weren’t trying to take out a very specific individual as much as they were just trying to get all of us they could. A bit of a relief, in some ways, and also a confirmation — as though we needed it now — that they knew where we were. How much they knew beyond that...

Well, Jackie probably didn’t have any idea.

“Did Mister P tell you anything else? About what he was going to be doing while you were here or why you needed to bring your Archer friend?”

“No,” Jackie said again. “He just went off somewhere with another us and said we might need friends to play with everyone else while we looked for Mommy.”

“Another you?”

Did she have a duplicating power or something? I didn’t see it on her when I checked, but if it was like Medea and she got split right down the middle or something...

“Another Jack,” she clarified. She tilted her head to the side. “We don’t know where he came from or why he calls himself Jack. *We’re* Jack. But he’s also Jack? We don’t understand.”

Could...there be more than one Jack the Ripper? I...guess it wasn’t impossible, was it? An original murderer and a copycat, that wasn’t unheard of at all. If there was never a distinction made between them, both could end up on the Throne, couldn’t they?

“Does Mister P have any friends? Mister B or Mister M?”

“We don’t know,” said Jackie. “He never met with anyone like that. Mostly, he just told us we could go play and look for Mommy whenever we wanted, but only when it was misty out. We were never allowed to make our own mist before today.”

Which explained quite a bit about her habits. And yes, I hadn’t forgotten about the fog slowly creeping in through the window. I didn’t know whether it was a function of the fog or if Caster’s bounded field was at work, but it seemed to be having a hard time gaining traction.

“What about the mist?” I asked her. “Is he making the fog that covers the city every day? Did he ever say what he needed it for or why?”

“No,” answered Jackie. “He said something about Angry Body, but he never told us what it was for.”

Angry body?

The look on Caster’s face said he might have some idea what she was talking about, but he had the good sense not to say anything out loud in front of her. Not when it had any chance at all of making it back to her Master.

Jackie tilted her head at me. “We’ve answered your questions, Taylor. Will you be our Mommy now?”

I did my best to keep my face impassive. *Arash? The other Archer?*

Got him, was Arash's reply. *He was slippery, but not that good at direct combat. I've been keeping an eye on things from out here. Do you want me to take out Jack?*

Standby, I told him. *Wait for my say so.*

Understood, he said.

"Come here, Jackie," I bade her.

Jackie hesitated for only a moment, and then slowly began to make her way over to me, picking carefully through the rubble.

When Jackie was finally in front of me, so close I could reach out and touch her, she just stood there, like she wasn't sure what to do. Frankly, I wasn't sure I did either, right then. It would have been easier to just have Arash put an arrow in her heart from outside.

On the off chance she managed to dodge, however, that would start the fight up again instantly. She might manage to slip away in all of that.

"You've never had a mommy before, have you?" I asked Jackie.

"No," she said simply. She didn't explain it any more than that.

"That's okay. I've never been a mommy before either."

Did the orphans from after Leviathan count? I wasn't sure they should. I hadn't been anywhere near attentive enough to be a proper parental figure, mostly because I hadn't had the time to devote to it.

But I could remember what having one felt like. What my own mother had said and how she'd treated me.

"First things first," I said, "put away the knives, Jackie. If I'm going to be your mommy, then you don't need them right now."

Hesitantly, she did exactly that, slipping the pair of knives she was carrying back into the holsters hidden under that tattered cloak. She looked up at me through her fringe, curious and halfway seeking my approval.

"Good." I leaned towards her a little, like I was sharing a secret. Out of the corner of my eye and with my bugs, I saw Caster tense. "Have you ever had a hug before?"

Jackie shook her head slowly.

"Would you like one?"

After a brief second, Jackie nodded. I held out my left arm in invitation — and Jackie stepped into it, pressing herself up against my chest. Awkwardly, stiffly, like she didn't quite know how she was supposed to be giving someone a hug or how she was supposed to get one.

The easiest way to trap someone was to convince them there wasn't a trap for them to walk into.

“Is she going to kill Jackie?” Nursery Rhyme asked Tohsaka, so quiet that I only heard her through my bugs.

“That’s what it looks like,” Tohsaka muttered back.

“That’s too bad,” Nursery Rhyme whispered, the way one talked about the neighbor’s pet goldfish dying. “Jackie was pretty fun to play with.”

For the first time since he told us about it, I was beginning to understand why Andersen held her in such contempt. Nursery Rhyme didn’t even seem to care.

Carefully, cautiously, so as not to spook her, I wrapped my arm around Jackie and pulled her in closer, and Jackie took in a sharp breath, then slowly, as though she didn’t know what to do and wasn’t sure she was doing it right, she lifted her arms and wrapped them around my ribs. After a second or two, she relaxed and let herself melt into me, face pressed against my shirt, to top of her hair tickling my chin.

And that was when I lifted my other arm, reversing my grip on my knife, and angled the tip *just so*, so that it would neatly and cleanly pierce her heart. A quick kill, too fast for her to react to anything.

“Mommy is so warm,” Jackie murmured into my chest.

A flash of memory jolted through my head, the image of a little girl, immortalized at the moment of her death, as my bullet passed through her head. The last child I’d had a hand in killing, one of the things I regretted the most, even knowing there weren’t any better options.

And just like then, I...

I...couldn’t do it.

My hand trembled. I knew the right course of action, that a Servant like Jackie was too volatile, too mercurial, and had spent too long being the enemy’s to trust her, so the only thing I should do was plunge my knife into her chest and be done with it. It might not be what she deserved, but even if she was just a child, she was a child long dead, and there was nothing I could do to save that child. Her fate, her suffering, was already history, and history was what we were here to preserve.

But I...

A sigh heaved out of me.

Goddamn it. Fuck whoever it was that kept trying to put me in situations like this, because the first time was bad enough and I didn’t need to have it thrown in my face over and over again.

I couldn’t save Aster. I couldn’t even save Jackie, not really, but...

I changed the angle of my knife and wrapped my other arm around Jackie.

“Jackie,” I muttered to her, “do you promise to be a good girl?”

“Mmhm.” She nodded her head into my chest. “I’ll be whatever Mommy needs me to be.”

And against all reason and logic, that was enough. My Command Spells burned for a brief moment, cementing the contract. The Assassin Servant, Jack the Ripper, became mine.

Carefully, I loosened my grip. “Now,” I said quietly, “there’s something I need you to do for me, Jackie. Could you get rid of this mist? It’s dangerous for Mommy to breathe that in.”

She tilted her head back and blinked up at me, then smiled, completely guileless. “Okay!”

I let her go carefully, cautious not to make any sudden moves. We were hopefully past the part where I really needed to worry about that, but I didn’t want to take any chances. My Servant or not, Jackie was still volatile, and until I learned her habits and her personality better, it was best to err on the side of caution.

Jackie stepped back from me and gave me enough clearance to move, although she didn’t look incredibly happy about that. She didn’t complain, at least, and took a moment to look out through the window.

Slowly, I stood. My clean knife slid home into its holster. Outside, the mist began to dissipate and vanish, rapidly clearing away as though it hadn’t been anything more than an illusion.

“Not the way I thought this was going to go, I must admit,” Caster muttered to himself, stroking his beard.

“Jackie is staying!” Nursery Rhyme cheered, smiling. Jackie smiled back.

“Alice is staying, too!”

A moment later, Arash came in through the already broken window and landed on the floor.

“Enemy Servant eliminated,” he announced. He glanced around the room, pausing only a second on me, and then on Jackie. He gave her a smile. “And it looks like we have a new friend. Hi, Jackie. My name is Arash. It’s nice to meet you.”

Jackie glanced at me as though for permission, and I gave her a little smile and a nod, for lack of any better way of handling it. The instant I did, she beamed and turned back towards Arash, “Hi, Arash! It’s nice to meet you, too! And, um, I’m sorry for fighting you yesterday.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Arash told her, still smiling. “Yesterday was yesterday. Today, we’re friends, aren’t we?”

Jackie nodded. “Mm!”

“Hold on a second, Jackie,” I told her. She looked over at me curiously.

She didn’t even seem to realize that her feet were still bleeding.

“First Aid.”

She gasped, looking down at her feet. “Mommy healed my feet!”

How would Mom have answered that? “You’re welcome, Jackie.”

She threw herself at me and wrapped her arms around my middle, oblivious to the way both Tohsaka and Caster stiffened, expecting the worst. “Thank you, Mommy!”

Awkwardly, I patted her on the head.

Beep-beep!

I answered my communicator, and when I did, Rika’s face appeared in the air above my wrist. “Yes?”

“Ah, Senpai!” she said, surprised. She turned away from me and towards something only she could see. “Onii-chan, we got through! It worked!”

A moment later, Ritsuka and Mash’s faces joined hers. “Miss Taylor!”

“Senpai.”

“Ritsuka, Mash.” I didn’t hear any fighting going on in the background. “You took care of things at Scotland Yard?”

They all grimaced.

“Ah,” said Ritsuka. He looked like he didn’t know how to explain it all, or maybe like he didn’t want to.

“We encountered a...being of some kind calling himself Jack the Ripper,” Mash reported, “but he was more like a...a Demi-Servant than a regular Servant, Miss Taylor. He, um...”

“His body didn’t disappear when he died,” Ritsuka said bluntly.

Mash closed her eyes. “Y-yes, that.”

“I threw up!” Rika announced cheerfully.

“There was other stuff that happened, but, Senpai,” said Ritsuka, “we found out who P is. He was there with Jack.”

I straightened a little. Caster and Tohsaka, both having heard and had their interests peaked, meandered over towards me to hear things better. The little girl attached to my hip looked up upon hearing her name, curious.

“You did?” I asked. “He was?”

“He said his name was Paracelsus.”

My brow twitched, the only reaction I couldn’t manage to hold back. I forced myself not to look in Caster’s direction.

Then who did that make *him*?