

## Chapter XI: Red Hound

The first of the two weeks Romani had allotted us to rest, relax, and recuperate passed by in a flurry of activity, and I had no part in any of it.

It made me feel antsy and anxious, having to sit on the sidelines and watch our skeleton crew of less than thirty people rush about as they tried to fix as much of the damage as they could as quickly as they possibly could. I got the sense that everyone knew we couldn't solve everything in a fortnight, even if Chaldea's systems were brought back up to where they'd been before the sabotage, but everyone treated it like we would if only they managed to repair everything as soon as they possibly could.

Naturally, as the most critical of Chaldea's assets, the twins, Mash, and I were relegated to just watching. If I was asked, I would have said it was overkill, but Romani fretted about any of us so much as pulling a muscle, and when Romani fretted, he tended to go a bit overboard.

Well, it wasn't like I would have been much help even if I'd been allowed to contribute, and that rankled in its own way, because I had always been more of a fighter than a technician, and what little knowledge of electrical repair I *did* have was woefully inadequate to the task of fixing basically anything in Chaldea. Although if the coffee machine broke down, maybe I could be useful then. Or if a lightbulb needed changing.

There wasn't much else for me to do, in the meantime. I wanted to get up, be active, actually *do* something that wasn't sitting on my ass reading any one of the novels I hadn't touched before because they weren't the kind that interested me, but the fact of the matter was that there wasn't really anything else *to* do. Even the combat simulator Masters were trained on was down for repairs, which meant any appreciable level of practice I could've gotten was out of the question.

I'd tried looking up information on King Solomon and the Ars Goetia that listed the seventy-two demons he controlled, but the data in Chaldea's servers was either too sparse to be useful or locked behind the Director's access permissions.

Access permissions that only Olga Marie Animusphere had or could give, which meant it was a dead end until we got her back.

The only thing really left to me that might actually have been meaningful was connecting with my fellow Masters, with Ritsuka and Rika, but I was socially awkward at the best of times and everything seemed to have hit them harder than I'd expected. Neither of them seemed in the mood to talk the entire week.

Not even Rika.

It felt like living with a distant roommate, like things had been with *Dad* during the bad times after Mom's death. I saw them every day, and we exchanged empty pleasantries if we ever got within arm's length of each other, but they were both subdued and quiet and didn't seem to know how to talk to me or even what to say.

I wasn't much better. They seemed to be taking the thing with the Director pretty hard, and the burden of the task ahead was dragging their shoulders down, and I just didn't know how to make them feel better or cheer them up. What was I supposed to tell them? That it got easier? Telling a lie like that wouldn't help anyone. Even if I said they'd get used to it all, that probably would've been more troubling than comforting.

A full week since the resolution of Singularity F, I strode into the cafeteria, one of the few places in Chaldea that had gone relatively untouched by Lev's sabotage. As usual, Rika and Ritsuka were already awake and sitting quietly at a table together, with Mash sitting between them. She looked up at me as I stepped through the doors and offered one of her gentle, characteristic smiles.

"Good morning, Miss Taylor."

"Morning, Mash," I replied, and then to the twins, "Ritsuka, Rika."

Both of them looked over at me sluggishly, bleary-eyed and sagging, and gave a weak, mumbled, "Morning, Senpai."

And then they turned away, looking down into their mugs of what I could only assume was coffee. Dark circles rimmed Rika's eyes, and Ritsuka kept blinking slowly, like he was struggling to stay awake. Mash, sitting next to them, sighed quietly.

My lips drew into a thin line, an expression Beryl had once told me made me look like a disappointed schoolteacher, but my stomach rumbled and I retreated away from the confrontation again.

I think they needed gentle understanding, and I didn't really do gentle understanding. If push came to shove and being gentle wasn't an option anymore... Well, there was a bridge I might have to cross, but until it came to that, there wasn't much else I could do but give them space.

I picked up a tray and a plate and made my way through the morning buffet line, scooping up a helping of scrambled eggs, toast, and a few strips of bacon. There was a machine for hot water, a kind of electric kettle, but I passed it by and filled myself a mug of the brown sludge they called coffee instead.

Tea was my preference, and I actually had a good selection of breakfast teas that Marie had requisitioned for me when she found out I liked it (when she heard I had "good taste," as she put it), but since we couldn't resupply in the foreseeable future, I was trying to ration those as best I could. There was no telling how long I was going to have to make them last.

With my tray loaded down, I walked over to an empty table and took a seat, hyperconscious of exactly how sparse the entire place was. Just a few weeks ago, at this time of the morning, I wouldn't have been able to find more than a few empty places to sit, and Wodime would've been insisting I eat with the rest of the dysfunctional Team A. I would've been surrounded by noise, people, *life*. Now? The cafeteria that could house up to three hundred people was all but deserted, and I ate alone.

I stabbed my fork into some of my eggs and took my first bite, grimaced, then grabbed the condiments tray and added some seasoning, a little salt and some pepper.

“Relatively” was a misleading term. Chaldea had lost some one-hundred-and-eighty of its two-hundred or so staff, and that included most of the senior cooking staff. What was left was doing their best, but their best wasn’t exactly gourmet, and it showed very much in how bland and uninteresting most of the meals I’d had for the last week had been.

While I chewed, I peered over at Mash and the twins, using the spot I’d chosen to surreptitiously spy on them. They had food, but it looked only half eaten, like they couldn’t stomach the rest. Only Mash looked like she’d done more than nibble around the edges.

...Intervening might wind up being inevitable. If they skipped out on eating for long enough, then things would get bad when we had to start repairing the other Singularities. We couldn’t afford for them to starve themselves every time something bad happened, because inevitably, a lot of bad things *would*.

In hindsight, Singularity F in Fuyuki had gone extraordinarily well. We technically lost the Director beforehand and afterwards (and that was a complicated bunch of tenses to explain to anyone who didn’t know what had happened), but of the people who went *in* alive, we’d all come out unharmed, and we’d successfully repaired the Singularity. Mission accomplished, with flying colors, even.

I wasn’t under any illusions that things would go that smoothly the whole way through. I’d count it a minor miracle if none of us lost at least one limb by the end of it.

My appetite suddenly soured, but I forced myself to finish my food, even if my stomach didn’t want it anymore. I was going to need my energy just as much as the twins were, in the days ahead. When I was finished, I drained as much of my coffee as I could make myself drink, then stood and returned my tray.

Mash gave me a little wave on the way out of the cafeteria, but the twins didn’t even seem to notice me leaving. They were still gazing down into their mugs like they could find the answers to all their problems there.

Out in the hallway, I found myself unsure of where I should go and what I should do. I felt like I should practice my magecraft, do something productive with my time, but Gandr was something I’d always done in the simulator, where I had room to fire it off and targets to aim at. When it came to the other bits of magecraft I had picked up...frankly, I hadn’t had a breakthrough with my puppets in months, and Marie was the one who had supervised my training in runes.

Without her to tutor me, what was I supposed to do? Again, the simulator was the best place for training something that could get fairly destructive. I wasn’t about to sit in my room and play with the literal explosives.

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. When the only other thing left for me to do was read a bunch of novels I didn’t care for...

“Guess I’ll go and practice with my puppets, then.”

A pivot on my heel, and I was heading back towards my room, accompanied only by the clack of my shoes on the smooth tile beneath my feet. I’d just felt the emptiness of Chaldea in the cafeteria, but out here alone as I walked the halls only drove it home all the more. The last two years, I’d seen at

least a dozen people on the way to any place in the facility, no matter the time of day or where I was going.

Now, it was a veritable ghost town, and all I had were the same useless, vague regrets that I hadn't gotten to know each and every one of those who were no longer there.

A hundred and eighty people. So small compared to the billions who had perished in Gold Morning, and the billions more who had been incinerated by Flauros and his cadre of demons, and yet it felt all the more personal to have lost them than the faceless masses.

A sigh hissed out of my mouth. Lisa probably would have had something to say about that. I wasn't sure I would have appreciated the humor, just then, but I wanted her there to say it all the same.

"Foul?"

I blinked, stopped, and looked down to find *that thing* staring up at me, its large ears pointing straight into the air and swiveled in my direction. Its beady little eyes were locked, unblinking, on mine. I would almost call it expectant.

I didn't know what it was about this thing, but something about it had always put me on edge. It wasn't just that it was smarter than any regular animal should be, no, it couldn't have been that simple, but whatever it was that unnerved me, I couldn't put my finger on it, either. It was like an itch that I couldn't reach, a long buried instinct that told me not to trust it, not to believe it, not to show my back to it.

Like it was the most dangerous, most feral beast in the world, and if I gave it a single opening, it would rip out my throat.

Keeping my eyes on the thing, I took one step to the side and tried to go around it, but it bounded back instantly and once more placed itself in my path. Waiting. For what, I didn't know.

I took one large step to the opposite side and tried to pass it a second time, but it bounded back again and stopped in front of me. Its beady eyes pinned me, and it sat there with unnatural stillness, unblinking, without so much as a twitch of its nose or ears.

"Foul?" it declared imperiously in that high, squeaky voice.

I could have stepped over it, except that a shiver swept down my spine at the very thought. I could have picked it up and moved it, except that the skin of my hands crawled even thinking about it.

It seemed like the only thing I could do was indulge it.

"What do you want?" I asked it tersely.

It juttied its chin up into the air and walked around me, and I watched it the entire time. It stopped a few paces away and looked back over its shoulder at me.

"Foul?"

Of course. I sighed.

“Right, you want me to follow you.”

“Fou!”

Taking orders from a squirrel... cat... *thing*, now. Imp would have been cackling like a loon.

Turning away from the path to my room, I followed behind...*Fou* as it started trotting down the hallway, and I wondered at my irrational response to the thing. It had never done anything to really warrant my suspicion or concern, and it was perfectly well-behaved around Mash and the twins. In fact, it had taken a shine to Ritsuka and Rika in record time, by all accounts. Even Romani and Da Vinci got pestered for pets and shoulder rides, on occasion, like it was some affectionate housecat.

So then why did I feel like it was the most dangerous thing in the whole facility?

Fou led me off past the cafeteria and further on down the hallway to the Command Room, where it came to a stop next to the door, turned back around to face me, and in that same, imperious tone, barked, “Fou!”

My lips pulled into a frown, but I opened the door and stepped through, trying to ignore the prickling of the fine hairs on the nape of my neck raising when it put my back to Fou.

Two years of this shit, I swear. Why was it only me, anyway?

Romani and Da Vinci looked up as I entered, huddled as they were over his terminal.

“Taylor,” said Romani. “Good, you’re here. There’s a couple of things we needed to discuss with you.”

“So you sent Fou?”

The little gremlin came as though summoned, and with an agility that could have gone either way, it bounded up to sit on top of Romani’s terminal. Romani grimaced.

“Well, we didn’t want to bring the twins in for this,” he admitted.

I shifted, crossing my arms over my chest. “You didn’t?”

He sighed himself, raking a hand through his hair. “They need a bit of a break,” he said. “I didn’t want to overwhelm them by pushing this decision off onto them, so I figured, as we’re the most senior staff left, in a way, we’d handle it on our own.”

“What Romani’s trying to say is that he doesn’t want to put them on the spot, considering the state they’re in right now,” Da Vinci interjected. “It’s better if the three of us take the burden, yes? Romani is the Acting Director, and you’re our most experienced Master. We’ll shoulder the weight, for now.”

I pursed my lips. As much as I didn't think we could afford to baby them forever, I didn't disagree that pushing them to take on too much too soon might be a bad idea. "What decision are we talking about?"

Romani reached over and tapped something out on his keyboard. A moment later, the image on his screen depicted the map of the world he'd shown us in the aftermath of Singularity F a little over a week ago.

"You remember what I said last week, right?"

"You've got data on two other Singularities, so far."

"France and Italy, yes," said Romani. "Well, Rome, specifically. We still haven't managed to get a higher resolution image of the other five, but these two, at least, we've got at least some idea of what they look like. Naturally, we won't be sending anyone into the others until we have a better idea of what we're looking at. For a lot of reasons, but the obvious one being that we can't confirm your existence if we don't know where and when it needs to be confirmed."

Which would mean we could unravel mid-Rayshift or simply cease to exist inside our own coffins, having never made it to our destination. Yes, I could see the problem with that.

"And?"

"We've been trying to determine which of these two we should deal with first," Da Vinci said. "As an Italian myself, I admit I'm partial to Rome. However... 60 AD was a bit of a tumultuous time for Rome. That year, Boudicca, an Iceni queen, rose up in open rebellion against the empire, so it might be a little more problematic to try handling that first."

She shrugged.

"On the other hand, it's entirely possible that the moment in history that the Singularity is trying to untether is exactly that rebellion. The deviation from the proper course of human history might simply be that Boudicca never rebelled, or even that she died before she could do it, allowing Rome to fully conquer Britain. It's also possible that Boudicca's rebellion was a success and Britain conquered Rome."

"And if that's the case, correcting it would be a lot more difficult," Romani pointed out. "Trekking across a city was one thing. Asking them to walk the breadth of the Roman Empire in search of the deviant influence is a bit much."

"As opposed to having them search the French countryside?" Da Vinci countered. "Orleans in 1431 only had one major, important event that changed the course of history, and that was the execution of Jeanne d'Arc. You want to send them on a mission that might require them to kill a girl their own age who just wanted to protect her own people?"

My stomach curled in on itself.

"Do we know that for sure?" I asked before they could get going again.

Killing Joan of Arc... That... No, that would be rough, even for me. I... I thought that I could probably do it, knowing that it would be essential to restoring our incinerated humanity, but I didn't really like what that probably said about me.

Asking the twins to do it... That might break them.

The two of them glanced at me, then shared a look, and then turned back to me.

"We simply don't know what to expect, going into any of this," Da Vinci admitted. "It's entirely possible that the deviation is some other thing utterly unrelated to either of those scenarios. It's also entirely possible that both could be true, or even that the Roman Singularity will require you to kill a victorious Boudicca in order to set things right."

"I think the one thing we should be able to expect is the presence of some form of Holy Grail," said Romani. "Frankly speaking, you'd need a miracle of that power to unmoor history from its natural position, and given that we retrieved one from Singularity F when you defeated Saber, completely independent from Fuyuki's Grail system —"

"We can expect that the one responsible for the deviation will be the one... *Flauros* gave a Holy Grail to," I concluded. "Just like Saber."

Romani nodded. "Theoretically, you might not even have to worry about personally correcting any mistakes. History is resilient like that. It should heal and fix itself on its own. As long as you can retrieve or destroy the Holy Grail responsible for pinning the deviation in place, the Singularity should dissolve without any other action from us."

The knot of tension in my gut slowly unraveled. So we probably wouldn't have to brutally murder the most famous saint in history who didn't have a holiday named after her.

"I think that's an incredibly optimistic outlook," Da Vinci said bluntly. "Even if all you technically need to do is remove the Holy Grail from the equation, by itself, that's going to require you wresting it from whoever has control of it. An enemy with possession of a powerful wish-granting artifact like the Holy Grail —"

"Isn't going to be one we can just flick on the nose and be done with it," I agreed. "So we should always go into a Singularity expecting a tough fight."

Romani shot Da Vinci a grimace, but held his tongue and turned to me instead.

"This is all our best guesses," he admitted. "The reality of the situation is that we just don't know anything for sure. We could be entirely wrong about everything, or we could both be some degree of right."

"We can use some simple common sense, though," Da Vinci said pointedly. "Destroying the lynchpins of history is itself an inherently violent act. At the very least, we have to assume they will also violently resist being corrected."

Romani let out a long, tired sigh and gave me a wan smile. "As you can see, we can't really agree about anything on the subject. As Acting Director while Director Animusphere is, ah, indisposed, I

could make the decision unilaterally, but I figured that since you'll be the one the ground leading the twins and Mash, it's really a decision that you should be making. Cast the deciding vote, if you want to think of it that way."

Leadership. Of a small, elite team, in fact, pursuing a mission of vital importance. It was strange how unfamiliar it had become over the course of two short years. In other ways, it was like putting on an old jacket I hadn't worn in a while.

Either way, since it was apparently up to me... When the choice was between fighting a single woman with a Holy Grail and fighting a woman with a Holy Grail who had an entire empire's worth of soldiers between us and her, the answer was a fairly obvious and simple one.

"We'll handle Orleans first," I said.

Romani smiled the smile of the vindicated. "I agree. I think, considering what little we have to go on, it's the safer choice to pick at this time."

Da Vinci sighed and shook her head, smiling ruefully. "Well, I can't say I don't know when I'm outnumbered. Okay, then. Since you two have made up your minds, it's settled. We'll deal with the Orleans Singularity first."

"I'll make our preparations going forward under that assumption," said Romani. "In the meantime, Taylor, there's one other thing I wanted to handle, today."

I cocked my head to the side a little, uncertain. "One other thing?"

He nodded. "We managed to get enough systems back online to properly restore functionality to FATE, as much as we ever had, at any rate." My heart skipped a beat. "We'd like to test it and see if we can actually manage to summon someone, this time."

"You want me to try again?" I managed to ask. He shook his head.

"Not you, specifically. If we get anyone at all, I'm not sure they'll be deployed into the Orleans Singularity with you when the time comes, depending on which Heroic Spirit answers. For now, we just want to test a hunch and see if it works. We can wait to attempt a more serious summoning until you've already got boots on the ground, so to speak."

Some of the tension in my gut eased.

"Why?"

Da Vinci answered. "If this works, then the next step is to try and hook up the Holy Grail you retrieved from Singularity F to Chaldea's power grid. If we can do that, we should be able to support at least three more Servants, whereas right now, we can only support Mash and two others."

Wouldn't it be better to wait until later, then? But I could see the sense in testing to make sure summoning more later would even be possible, too.

"We're just trying to see if we even *can* summon a Servant?"



“That’s right.”

“That’s fine, then. I don’t see a problem with that.”

“Alright.” Romani leveraged himself out of his chair. “Let’s go, then.”

I blinked. “Now?”

“No time like the present.” He turned to Da Vinci. “Could you go and get Mash and the twins? We’ll meet you there.”

Da Vinci grinned and offered him a sarcastic salute. “Roger that, Director Archaman!”

Romani groaned as she left. “*Acting* Director,” he mumbled after her. “*Acting*. The minute we’ve got Director Animosphere back, I’m just the head of Medical, again.”

My lips tugged to the one side. Romani was one of the few people I’d ever met who was so allergic to the idea of having power.

“Fou,” Romani said, turning to look at where it had last been, “are you —”

It was gone. Romani blinked. “He must have gone after Da Vinci to get the twins. I swear, sometimes, Fou scares me with how sneaky he can be.” He turned to me. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

He typed a few things on his terminal — logging out, if I had to guess — and then started towards the door. I fell into step beside him and let him lead the way towards the summoning chamber. The empty halls echoed back at us in the silence.

It was only once we were out of earshot of the command room that I spoke up.

“You can’t baby them forever,” I told Romani quietly. “Eventually, they’re going to have to make real, hard decisions, and the longer we put that off, the less prepared they’re going to be for it.”

“I know,” Romani admitted, equally as quiet. He sounded resigned. Tired. “But if we just start dumping it on them all at once... I don’t want them to break under all that pressure.”

“I didn’t.”

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. I expected him to say something trite, like pointing out that the twins weren’t me. What he actually said killed any retort that I might have been mustering.

“I’m not so sure about that.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, not when my response to losing a battle against a god was, as Alec might have put it, to leak my brains out of my ears until I landed on the winning strategy, so we made the rest of the trip in silence, our footsteps clacking off the floor.

Eventually, we made it to another room behind another set of bland, white doors that slid open as we approached, and we stepped into what looked kind of like a teleporter room from either some 80s scifi show or some Tinker's attempt at making one of his own, with a strange machine mounted to the ceiling in the middle above a raised sort of circular platform. Arrayed around it were consoles and terminals for keeping track of the whole thing.

Back when Marie had first shown me the summoning room, there had been half a dozen technicians monitoring Chaldea's FATE system. Debugging, chasing down error codes, running simulations, whatever was necessary to make sure that it would be ready to go when the time came. It had all looked fairly impressive.

The summoning chamber of the current Chaldea had one man at its consoles, a single, slightly pudgy blond with glasses who looked like he hadn't slept since the sabotage. When I thought about it that way, it was entirely possible that he hadn't.

It seemed like everywhere I went, I was faced with reminders of exactly how thoroughly and tragically Chaldea had been gutted.

"Are we ready to go?" Romani asked.

The technician looked up at us, adjusted his glasses with one extended finger, and gave a slight nod. "Everything is back online. We're back up to where we were before..."

He trailed off uncomfortably.

Romani sighed. "Yeah."

An awkward silence fell, and after a moment, the technician went back to his monitors and Romani and I stepped off to the side, out of the way of the doors. Neither of us tried to strike up more conversation.

A few minutes later, the doors opened, and Da Vinci walked in, smiling brightly. "We're here!"

Rika and Ritsuka followed behind her, looking rough and exhausted, and Mash brought up the rear. *I*, Fou, was perched on her shoulder.

"Miss Taylor, Doctor Roman," Mash greeted us politely.

The twins startled a little when they realized we were there. "Senpai! Doctor Roman!"

"Hello, Rika, Ritsuka, Mash," Romani said kindly. "Good morning."

"A-ah, good morning!" Ritsuka stuttered. Rika tried to echo him, but she broke out into a yawn before she could get the words out.

"So!" Da Vinci clapped her hands. "Let's get this show on the road, shall we? *Signor* Meunier, I realize this isn't your normal position in Chaldea, but I hope my instructions were clear enough on how this works?"

“Ah, yes, of course!” the technician, Meuniere, apparently, said.

Da Vinci turned back to us. “So! Who would like to do the honors, this time?”

“Senpai isn’t doing it?” Ritsuka asked, sounding surprised.

I affected indifference. “If neither of you is up to it, I’m perfectly willing.”

The twins shared a look, and in that single look, seemed to have an entire silent conversation, because after a few seconds, Rika nodded and stepped forward. “I’ll do it!”

Da Vinci stepped to the side and gestured to a small dais in front of the circular summoning platform. After a moment’s hesitation, Rika walked forward and climbed up onto it.

“This is going to be a little different from Taylor’s attempt in Fuyuki. Ah, but first — Mash? If you would be so kind, please place your shield in the center of the summoning platform overtop the formula, would you?”

“Of course,” said Mash, and in a flash of light, she had transformed back into the form of the Servant she’d taken in Fuyuki. Once again, she hefted her enormous shield like it was weightless, and she did exactly as asked and set it down so that the round base was situated at the center of the platform, and then she stepped back.

“I didn’t realize Mash’s shield was so important it was part of the summoning ritual, too,” said Ritsuka.

“It’s not supposed to be,” Da Vinci answered. “After all, the summoning ritual and Chaldea’s FATE system have been around for years, and yet last week was the first time Mash had successfully manifested the powers of the Servant bound to her body. However, the number of successful Servant summonings in Chaldea is less than five.”

“Really?” said Ritsuka.

“Really,” said Romani. “Technically, you’re looking at two of them right now. No one knows what happened to the first, but Da Vinci and Mash are the only ones we managed to make work right, and even then, I’m not sure you can properly count Mash, since she’s a Demi-Servant.”

It made me wonder how they had intended for us Team A members to properly summon our own Servants, if the system had struggled to get just three.

“Wow.”

“I have a hunch, however,” Da Vinci said, grinning a grin just this side of manic. “If I’m right, then every summoning from here on should work perfectly, as long as we have the energy to support them.” She stepped forward. “Meuniere, are we ready to begin?”

“Set up and ready to go, Da Vinci.”

Da Vinci smiled. “Now, Rika, I want you to repeat after me.”

Rika's hair bobbed as she nodded. "Got it."

"Heed my words."

"Heed my words!" Rika said loudly, thrusting her arm forward. She was almost certainly mimicking me.

"My will creates your body, and your sword creates my destiny."

"My will creates your body, and your sword creates my destiny!"

The circle beneath Mash's shield began to glow, and then the symbols seemed to lift off of the ground and into the air.

"If thou accedes to my will and reason, then answer me."

"If thou accedes to my will and reason, then answer me!"

The floating circle glowed brighter and brighter until it became hard to look at. Like some great gear lurching into motion after years and years gathering rust, a grinding noise filled the room as an unseen wind swept out from the center.

"I hereby swear —"

"— that I will embody all the good in this world and punish all evils!"

"Thou the Seventh Heaven —"

"— clad in the three great words of power!"

"Come forth from the Ring of Deterrence —"

"— Guardian of the Heavenly Scales!"

The grinding noise reached a fevered pitch. The glow of the circle became too bright to watch, and I had to shield my eyes against it to keep from being blinded. The wind rushed out, whipping back my hair — and then, just as suddenly, it all died away.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to blink the spots out of my vision, and slowly, I let my arm fall to look at the figure now kneeling atop Mash's shield. Red was the first thing I saw, red and black and a shock of white, and as my eyes readjusted, the rest of it slowly came into detail.

My stomach clenched as the man stood.

"Servant, Archer."

His low, deep baritone sent shivers down my spine, and as he opened cool, steely gray eyes, he smirked at the group of us.

"You've summoned me, and I've come at your request. Nice to meet you, Master."

Rika, Ritsuka, and Mash all gasped.

“You!”